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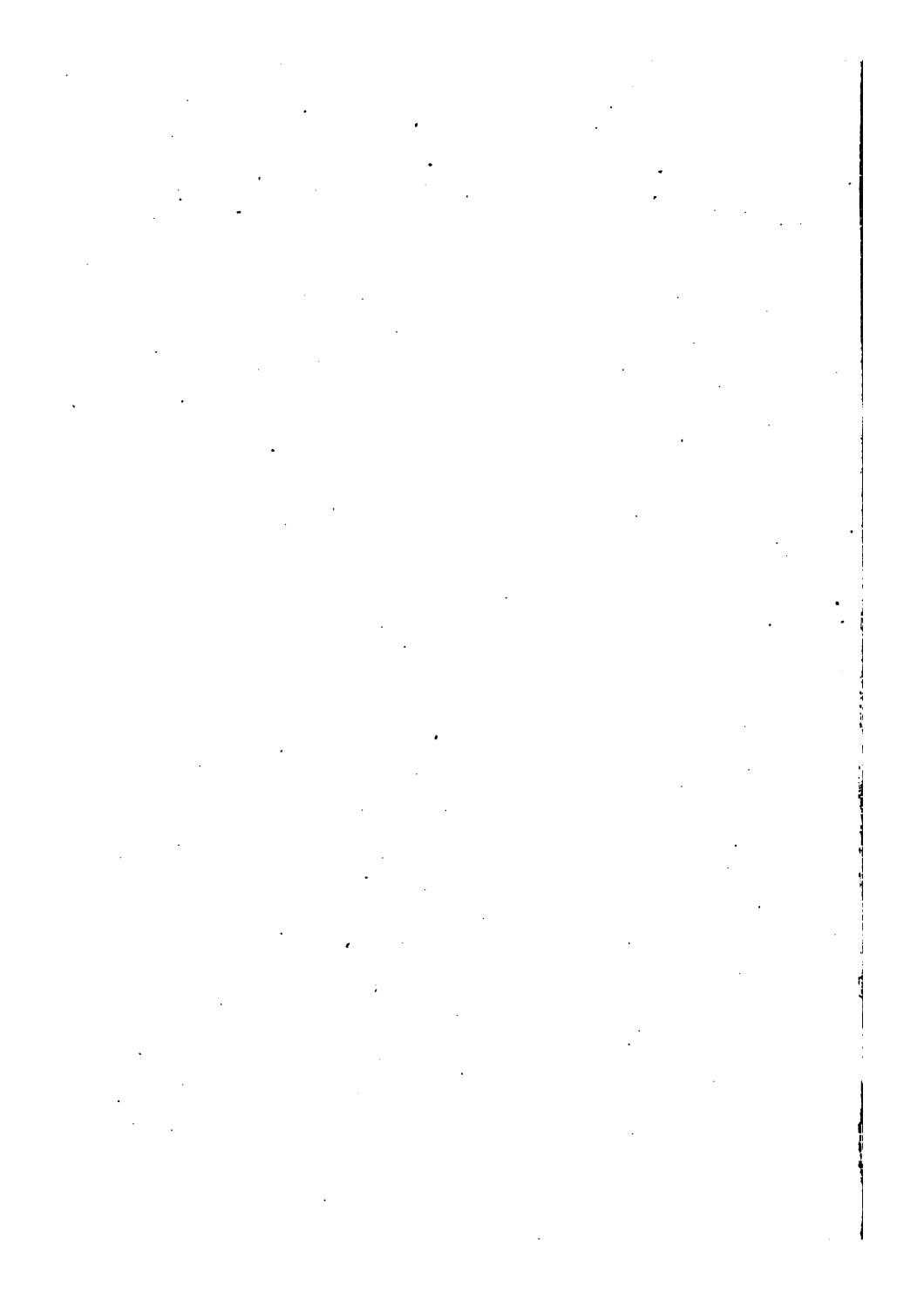
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THE POWER OF THE KEYS.







OF

The Power of the Keys;

OR,

THE AUTHORITY TO BIND AND TO LOOSE, TO
REMIT AND TO RETAIN SINS, COMMITTED
BY CHRIST TO HIS CHURCH.

BY

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P R E F A C E .

THE following Tract is an enlarged edition of a pamphlet on the *Doctrine of Absolution*, published anonymously in the year 1871. All that the Author has since read, in connexion with this important subject, has strengthened his conviction of the truth of the view therein advocated. He therefore ventures to present it again to the public, in what he believes to be an improved form, and with additions which throw further light upon it.

It is needless to urge the importance of a right understanding of those words of Christ, in which He bestowed upon His Church the “power of the keys,” or the authority to bind and to loose, to remit and to retain sins. They were among the latest of the commissions of the Great Head of the Church, delivered upon an occasion of deep solemnity; and they intimately concern

man's happiness or misery. And it is no small additional incentive to the desire to comprehend their true meaning, that a perversion of that meaning has given the chief support to the sacerdotal power, which has weighed like a nightmare upon the spiritual life of Christendom.

And the confusion in which the subject is involved is no less great than its importance. In proof of this, it is only necessary to refer to the diversity of views respecting it—views for the most part so unlike, that we are led to ascribe them rather to the tones of thought which prevailed at the periods of the world's history at which they took their rise, than to a critical examination of the language of the original message.

The doctrines relating to the Church's power to remit and to retain sins may be reduced to three principal, which, for brevity, are here styled the doctrines of the Primitive, the Mediæval, and the Reformed Churches, respectively. Of these the Author believes that one, which he holds to have been the primitive doctrine, to be also the true one; and he has endeavoured to prove this from an examination of our Lord's words themselves, and from the sense in which

they seemed to have been understood by His Apostles. The writer whom he has generally followed, in this discussion, is the learned Hammond, whose treatise *On Binding and Loosing*, published in 1647, is a model of sound and able exegesis.

But this view has been supplanted in succession by two others, now held, for the most part, by the two great sections of the Western Church ; and it is evident that this fact alone must interpose a serious obstacle to its acceptance, if the origin of the later theories could not be reasonably accounted for. Accordingly, in the second chapter of this Tract, the Author has endeavoured to trace the successive steps by which the Western Church descended—first by ritual *additions*, and afterwards through ritual *changes*—on the road to Tridentine dogma; while, in the third, he has sought to show in what manner the Reformers, starting from what was best and purest in Mediæval doctrine—the views of Gregory the Great, and of the schoolmen—may have been led to modify them.

In the account of the discipline of the Church, the Author has, of course, referred continually to the elaborate work of Morinus *De Sacramento*

Pœnitentiae,—to the Histories of the Christian Councils,—and to the great work of Martene *De Antiquis Ecclesie Ritibus*. The short and excellent treatise of Marshall on *The Penitential Discipline of the Primitive Church*, published in 1714, contains, however, much of the materials required in this branch of the subject. It is needless to add, that the well-known work of Bingham on *The Antiquities of the Christian Church* has been continually referred to, although with the views of that writer upon the main question—as well as with those of Archbishop Ussher from which they are taken,—the Author is unable to concur.

The *Sylloge Confessionum*, published at Oxford, and the valuable treatise of Winer on *The Confessions of Christendom*, supply a great portion of the materials needed in relation to the views of the Continental Reformed Churches. The Church of England has given no authoritative exposition of her views in reference to the Power of the Keys, beyond that contained in her 33rd Article. The statements contained in the catechisms of King Edward VI., and of Dean Nowell, and in the second Book of the Homilies (which differs from the other two), cannot be placed in the same category.

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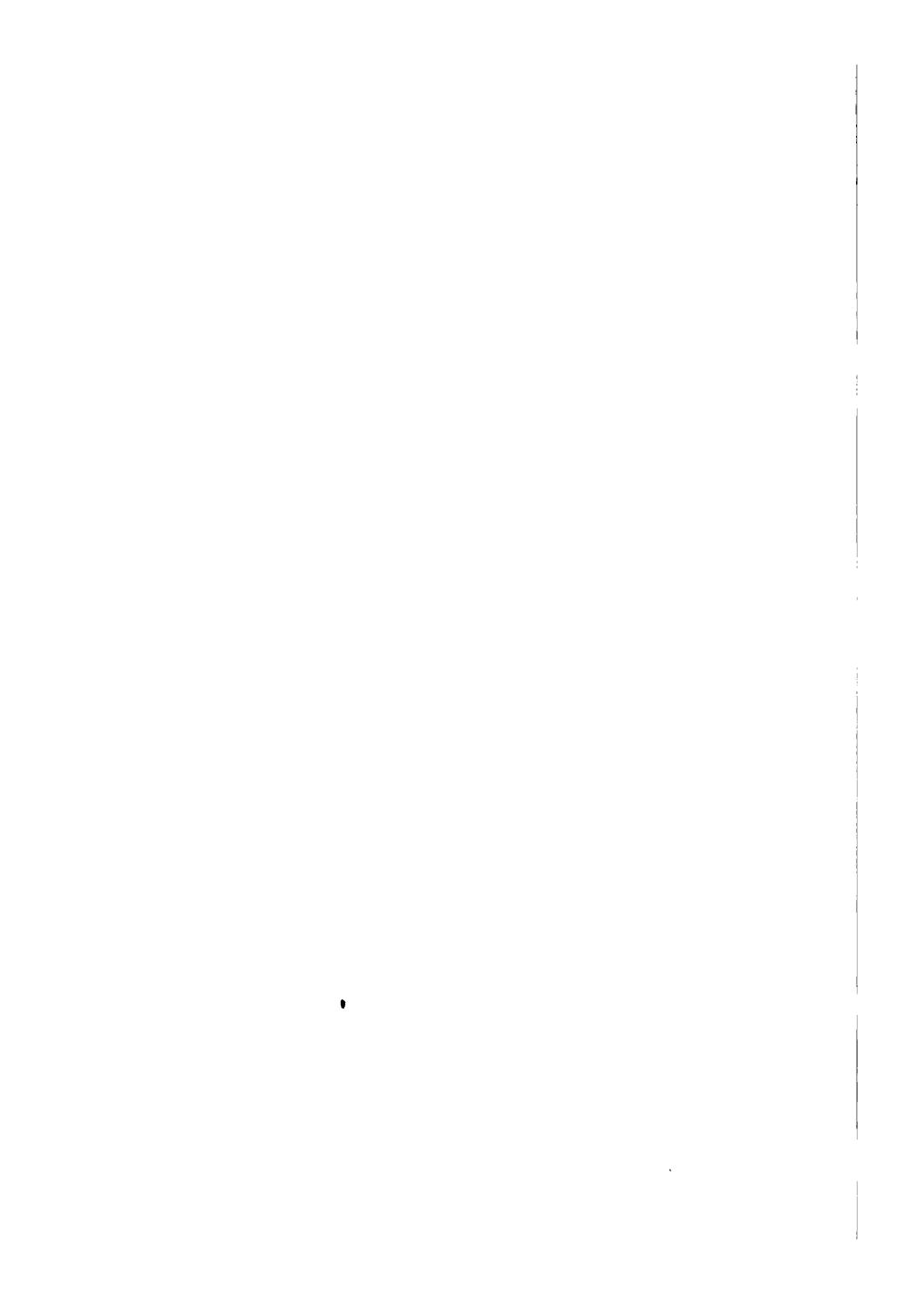
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THE DOCTRINE OF ABSOLUTION.

CHAPTER I.

THE AUTHORITY TO REMIT AND TO RETAIN SINS
COMMITTED BY CHRIST TO HIS CHURCH.

I. Meaning of Our Lord's Commission.

THE commissions given by Christ to His Church, in the solemn interval which elapsed between His resurrection and His ascension, were twofold. In one of these—that recorded by the first two of the synoptic evangelists—He commands His chosen messengers to establish, and to extend, the Spiritual Kingdom which He came to found upon earth, and to proclaim to all nations the new covenant between God and man which He had sealed with His blood:—“Go ye therefore and teach (make disciples of) all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20.)

In the other, recorded by St. John, He confers upon His followers authority to maintain the kingdom, so founded, by suitable government and discipline—“Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosesoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosesoever sins ye retain, they are retained”* (John xx. 22, 23).

It would be idle to dwell upon the importance of a right understanding of these last utterances of our Lord. It is enough to observe that, from a misunderstanding, if not a perversion of the meaning of one of them, the spiritual tyranny of the Church of Rome has drawn its main support; while from a confusion of the two commands, wholly distinct in themselves, the grasp of vital truth in the Reformed Churches has been weakened.

There is happily no question as to the meaning of the former of these utterances. The true meaning of the latter, on the other hand, has been the subject of larger and more varied comment than that of almost any other passage in the sacred writings. And yet we possess a clue to that meaning, which is not often afforded by the sacred penmen. The words of our Lord, whether promising or conveying this authority to His Church, were uttered by Him upon three distinct occasions; and it is by a

* “The Apostles,” writes Hammond, “are to be considered under a double notion—1. as *planters*; 2. as *governors* of the Church. The title of *Αποστολος* in its literal (sense) belongs peculiarly to the former of these; and so though it have some extraordinary privileges annexed to it, necessary to the work of planting, . . . yet in the persons of the Apostles it was but a precedaneous power, preparatory to that other of ruling or governing.”—Hammond. *Binding and Loosing*, c. iii.

comparison of these that we must seek to arrive at the full perception of their true import.*

The first of these is contained in our Lord's address to Peter, immediately after his confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God:—"I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth, shall be bound in Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, shall be loosed in Heaven" (Matt. xvi. 19).

The first clause of this passage is to be interpreted, as Lightfoot has shown, by the customs of the Jews. Among the Jews the act of installing an officer was commonly accompanied by the ceremony of giving him a key, or keys; and the action symbolized the grant of ministerial authority. In using this figure, then, our Lord promised that He would confer on Peter, as representing, in this case, His entire Church,† authority in

* It seems to be conceded by nearly all interpreters of Scripture, that the two passages in Matthew, (xvi. 19) and (xviii. 18), and the one in John (xx. 22-3), relate to the same subject. This is assumed by all the Fathers; and it is conclusively proved by the learned Hammond.

† That our Lord's words to Peter were addressed through him to the entire Church, is affirmed by many of the early Fathers. St. Augustine says—"Petrus multis locis scripturarum apparel, quod personam gestat Ecclesiae; maximè illo in loco ubi dictum est—'Tibi dabo claves regni eolorum.' Numquid istas claves Petrus accepit, et Paulus non accepit?" Aug. Serm. 30. And again—"Ecclesia que fundatur in Christo, claves ab eo regni eolorum accepit in Petro: id est potestatem ligandi, solvensque peccata."—In Joh. tract. 124.

St. Ambrose says—"Quod Petro dicitur, cesteris apostolis dicitur—'Tibi dabo claves,' " &c.—Ambr. in Psalm. 38.

that Church—here called the kingdom of Heaven—which He then declared it to be His purpose to found. And it is worthy of remark that the Apostle, to whom this authority was thus first announced, was also the first to exercise it: (Acts v. 1–10). It will be observed, that the words are in the future tense—“*I will give thee;*” and it is supposed by some commentators that it is to this future jurisdiction that our Lord refers in Luke xxii. 29, 30—“*I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me; that ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*”*

The second clause will be better understood from the corresponding passage in Matt. xviii., in which the same words are applied to *all the disciples*. In the previous part of this address our Lord had been speaking of offences between man and man, and of the manner in which such offences were to be dealt with by His disciples—“*If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone. If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy*

Theophylact says:—“*Licet at Petrum tantum dictum est illud—‘Tibi dabo’—tamen omnibus apostolis olim datum est, quando dixit, ‘Quorum remiseritis peccata.’*”—*In Matth. 16.* To this statement Tertullian is an exception, this Father maintaining that the promise to Peter was *personal*.

* This view of the parallel passage (Matt. xix. 28) is that taken by Hammond; and he regards the latter words of the passage to refer to the authority actually exercised by the Phylarchs, or rulers of the tribes among the Jews.

brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established.* And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the Church ; but if he neglect to hear the Church let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican" (Matt. xviii. 15-17). I have quoted this passage at length on account of its important bearing upon the meaning of the words which follow. The whole discourse relates to man's forgiveness of offences committed against himself, and to the course which the offended party is to take ; and the concluding words plainly teach that the offender, who shall obstinately reject all overtures of reconciliation, is to be rejected from the Communion of the faithful—he is to be dealt with as the Jews dealt with a heathen or a publican ; that is, he is to be excluded from all communion, both civil and religious. Our Lord then adds—"Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in Heaven ; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth, shall be loosed in Heaven."† The meaning here seems to be clear. "In this context," writes the Bishop of Ely, "there can be no reasonable question, that the *binding* means to place in a state of bondage or excommunication from Church privilege, and the *loosing* signifies to restore again to the

* See 2 Cor. xiii. 1.

† In this passage, as in the preceding, as Hammond has well observed, the *loosing* is connected with the previous *binding* ; and therefore neither of them afford the slightest warrant for absolving those who had not been previously bound by Church censure or excommunication.

freedom of Christian Communion." In fact, this is the meaning put upon the words by all the early Fathers,* as well as by most recent commentators. The words are used in this sense in the Jewish formularies, and must therefore have been so understood by our Lord's Jewish hearers. And, lastly; our own Church has accepted the interpretation by her reference to the words in her 33rd Article.

The promise therefore is, that whosoever is excluded by the lawful act of the Church from its Communion, will be regarded by God Himself as without its pale ; and whosoever is, by the same lawful authority, absolved from his bond, and readmitted to Communion, will be restored in the sight of God to all the privileges which He has promised to His Church. "It is clear," writes Dean Comber, "that our Lord did here give His Apostles a Commission, as well to exclude notorious criminals out of His Church by excommunication, as to readmit them upon their repentance."†

Such a power is inherent in every society, and is

* Cyprian interprets the words of our Lord recorded in Matthew xviii. 17, as also those of St. Paul (2 Thess. iii. 6. and Tit. iii. 10), as enjoining the practice of excommunication of impenitent sinners. Origen writes—"He that judgeth uprightly hath the keys of the kingdom of Heaven, and opens to them that are absolved on earth, so that they are loosed in Heaven; again he shuts to them who by right judgment are bound on earth, so that they are, as it were, bound and judged in Heaven." And he applies to excommunication the expression of St. Paul—the delivery to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.—*Hom. in Matt. xvi. and xx.* St. Augustine says—"When the Church excommunicates, the excommunicated person is bound in Heaven."—*Aug. Ps. 108.*

† Comber. *Common Prayer, art. Excommunication.*

essential to its very existence ; and we should be justified in concluding that it belonged to the spiritual society which our Lord had founded, even if He had given no direct injunction on the subject. In the Heathen world such a power has always been acted upon. Thus, in the celebration of the Eleusinian Mysteries, a censor proclaimed that no impious or unclean person should be present ; and Suetonius relates that the Emperor Nero did not venture to take part in the celebration afterwards. Tertullian tells us that the profane were expelled from all the Heathen Mysteries ; and many of the works of classical antiquity contain allusions to the exclusion from the assemblies, both civil and religious, of those who were guilty of abominable crimes. It is more to the purpose, however, to note that the practice of excommunication was common among the Jews ; for we know that our Lord not only conformed to the usages of the country in which He was born, but even based the most solemn rites which He ordained upon them. During the earlier periods of Jewish history, and under the Theocracy which then subsisted, the civil and the religious were inseparably united, and excommunication was only the indirect penalty of transgression, enforced chiefly against such as were legally unclean. Thus Miriam was smitten with leprosy for speaking evil of Moses, and was consequently excluded for a limited time from the Camp, and from the Tabernacle ;* and King Uzziah was similarly punished

* Numbers xii., 14.

for his attempt to usurp the priestly office. But when the Jewish commonwealth was overthrown during the Babylonian captivity, and, after the return of the people, by the Roman Conquest, civil rights were in a great measure lost, and the penalty of excommunication was limited, as afterwards among Christians, to offences against religion and morality. The earliest example of this change is the excommunication denounced by Ezra, on the return of the Jews from the Captivity, for intermarriage with Heathens.* In the time of our Lord's sojourn upon earth, the penalty in this form had become common and frequent. St. John tells us that the Jewish rulers had decreed that whosoever should confess Christ should be put out of the Synagogue, and that the dread of this penalty restrained not only the parents of the blind man who had been miraculously cured by Christ (John ix. 22), but even the members of the Sanhedrim itself, from confessing Him (John xii. 42). And before His Passion our Lord Himself warned His disciples that the Jews would "cast them out of their synagogues" (John xvi. 2).

We should, therefore, have been justified in concluding that our Lord intended that His Church should possess the power to exclude from, and to readmit to membership, even if He had Himself been silent upon the subject. But in the discourse which we have been considering He gives His express sanction to the exercise of such a power; and as He had instituted the sacra-

* Ezra x., 8.

ment of baptism, as the rite by which new members were to be admitted into His kingdom, so here He appoints the means by which those who had broken the laws of that kingdom were to be cut off, and restored again upon repentance. He accordingly directs that the penalty of excommunication, which was an established practice of the Jews,* should be extended to the spiritual kingdom which He was about to found. It is true there are some important differences between the practice of excommunication as it existed among the Jews, and as delivered by Christ to His Church; but so also there were differences between the sacraments themselves, and the Jewish rites to which they were undoubtedly related.

To complete this chain of evidence, the power, thus sanctioned by our Lord Himself, was actually exercised by more than one of His Apostles, and mainly by that Apostle to whom He assigned a chief part in the mighty task of establishing His kingdom upon earth.

The remaining utterance of our Lord in connexion with this subject is that recorded by St. John. The occasion upon which it was delivered was one of deep solemnity. It was that upon which the risen Saviour first manifested Himself to His assembled disciples;

* For the nature and degrees of Jewish excommunication see Smith's "Dictionary of the Bible," vol. iii., and Bishop Browne on the Articles (Art. 33). The three forms of Jewish excommunication are supposed to be referred to by our Lord Himself, in the words recorded by St. Luke (vi. 22).

and it is evident, from the account of the meeting handed down to us by St. Luke, as well as by St. John, that the great Head of the Church chose this occasion to *convey* to it the powers which He had previously *promised*, as well as to instate its officers in their commission—"He breathed on them, and said unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John xx. 22, 23).

The difficulty in the interpretation of this passage arises, mainly, from the fact that the words cannot be understood in their ordinary sense without qualification. That none can forgive sins, but God alone, is the plain teaching of the Bible; and the truth was fully acknowledged by the early Church. Thus Cyprian, whose tendencies leaned strongly to the exaltation of the Church's power, writes—"Let no man deceive, none beguile himself; it is God alone that can show mercy. He alone can pardon the sins committed against him, who did Himself bear our sins, who suffered grief for us, whom God did deliver for our sins."* In what sense, then, are the words to be taken?

In order to understand this question, it must be borne in mind that every injury or wrong done by man to man may be regarded under a double aspect—first, as an offence against man; and, secondly, as sin against God, and a violation of His holy law. As St. Paul has said—"When ye sin so against the brethren, and

* Cyprian. *De Lapsis.*

wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ" (1 Cor. viii. 12). Now God alone can pardon the sin against Himself: but man may forgive the injury done to him; and a community of men may forgive the wrong done to their society by transgression, whether that transgression be an evil directly inflicted upon one of its members, or a violation of those moral laws by which society itself is held together. It is in this second sense alone, we conceive, that our Lord's words are to be understood; and they convey to His Church the power to pardon sin, so far as it was an offence against the Church itself, or to punish it by the expulsion of the offender. The power of remitting and retaining sins is therefore, like that of binding and loosing, the power to excommunicate and to absolve.

This view is expressed with great clearness by Bishop Fell.* "It is to be observed," he writes, "that in every delinquency there are two things to be considered—First, the offence against God, of which David says in

* "Notari autem poterit, in omni delicto duo spectanda occurrere, primò offensam adversus Deum, de quā David Ps. li.—'In te, in te solum peccavi.' In cuius remedium precibus et resipiscentiā unicè proficitur, juxta illud D. Petri (Act. viii. 22) ad Simonem Magum—'ponitentiam age ab hāc nequitia tuā, et roga Deum,' &c. Secundo intervenire offensam adversus fratres, de quā D. Paulus (1 Cor. viii. 12), 'Peccantes in fratres, et percutientes conscientiam eorum,' &c. Cui amoliendae venia ab Ecclesiā, seu parte lēsā, et illius nomine ab Episcopo qui eidem praeest, omnino expetenda est, juxta illud Apostoli (2 Cor. ii. 10)—Cui autem aliquid donastis, et ego: nam et ego quod donavi, si quid donavi, propter vos in personā Christi."—*Cypriani de lapsis, Annot.* p. 136.

his 51st Psalm—‘Against thee, thee only, have I sinned’—and for the remedy of which prayers and repentance alone avail, according to those words of St. Peter to Simon Magus—‘Repent, therefore, of this thy wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee.’ Secondly, offence against the brethren, of which St. Paul writes in his first Epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. viii. 12). For the relief of which pardon must be sought from the Church, and in its name from the presiding bishop, according to those words of the Apostle—‘To whom ye forgive anything, I forgive also; for if I forgave anything, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ.’

And for this distinction we have the warrant of our Lord’s own words uttered on other occasions. Thus, speaking of the sin against the Holy Ghost, He says—“It shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come” (Matt. xii. 32); where the former clause of the sentence relates to the pardon of the Church, and the latter to that of God Himself in the day of final retribution.

And this interpretation of the passage is fully established, if it be allowed that the power of *remitting* and *retaining sins*, referred to in John xx., is the same with the power of *binding* and *loosing* spoken of by Christ in His earlier addresses to His disciples. Upon this point nearly all commentators are agreed. Thus Theophylact, commenting on Matthew xviii., says that the

power of *loosing* and *binding* was given to the Apostles, when our Lord said—"whose sins ye remit, they are remitted." Chrysostom says that "Christ did invest His Apostles with the power of retaining and remitting sins, as when a king sends governors over provinces he gives them power of imprisoning and releasing."^{*} And Eutychianus, Bishop of Rome, in an address to the Bishops of Sicily, A. D. 275, thus comments on the words of John xx. 23—"The door of the Heavenly kingdom shall be shut against those whom ye turn out of the Church, unless they be reconciled by satisfaction."[†] And among the commentators of modern times Dean Comber says—"After our Lord's resurrection He, who is the best expounder of His own meaning, declares that *binding and loosing* signifies re-

* Chrys. in *Job* hom. 86.

† "Quibus ecclesiam interdixeritis, nisi reconciliati per satisfactionem fuerint, ipsis janua regni coelestis clausa erit." It is doubtless true that more than one of the early Fathers, while holding the passages in Matthew and in John to be identical, yet entertained a somewhat different view of their meaning. Thus Cyprian makes the promise to St. Peter (Matt. xvi.), as well as the gift to all the Apostles (John xx.), to refer to the remission of sins in baptism. And both Cyril of Alexandria, and Chrysostom, explain the latter words as referring to baptism and penance. (See Bingham, *Antiq.* xix. i. 2). But this seems hard to be maintained. In the first place, our Lord's commission to His Apostles, narrated by St. John, was given at another time, and upon a different occasion, from the commission to make disciples by baptism. And, secondly, the words—"whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained"—cannot, without much straining, be applied to the *refusal to baptize* the impenitent and the unfaithful, of the exercise of which power there is no record in apostolic times.

mitting or retaining of sins, and turns the ‘whatsoever ye shall bind,’ &c., into ‘whosoever sins ye remit,’ &c. Finally, Grotius and Hammond have shown, in a critical discussion of the language of the two passages, that the verbs *λύειν* and *ἀφίεναι* have the same meaning; and on the other hand, the only difference in signification between the words *δέειν* and *κρατεῖν* is, that the former signifies *to bind*, simply, while the latter properly means *to keep bound*. The Seventy translate the same Hebrew word by both.

Sins, therefore, in this passage, signify offences against the Church,* and to retain and to remit sins is the same thing as to bind and to loose, to *excommunicate* and to *absolve*. And if the interpretation given of the passages in Matt. xvi. and xviii. be correct, the words under consideration must be understood as the *actual conveyance* of the authority before promised.†

It remains to speak of the introductory words in John xx. 22, and of their relation to those that fol-

* The difficulty in apprehending what seems to be the true meaning of this passage has been enhanced to us by the use of the word “sin” in our translation, a word which we habitually apply only to offences against God. But there is no such limitation in the original. The Greek words *αμάρτια* and *αμαρτανω*, are used in the Bible to express offences against man, as well as sins against his Maker. Thus in one of the passages which we have been discussing, the verb is twice used to denote offences against the brethren (Matt. xviii. 15 and 21). See also Acts xxv. 8, and 1 Cor. viii. 12. In the last-mentioned passage sin against the brethren is declared to be also sin against God.

† Another interpretation of the passage will be considered hereafter (chap. III.).

low :—“ And He breathed on them, and said, Receive ye the Holy Ghost.”

The gift of the Holy Ghost here spoken of appears to have been the first of the *χαρισματα*, of which we read in the Acts of the Apostles. It was manifestly not the full bestowal of that “ power from on High” for which our Lord commanded His disciples to tarry in Jerusalem, and which was conferred upon the day of Pentecost. But when its connexion with the following words is considered, it will, I think, be evident that it was a power intended to strengthen the hands of the first rulers of the Church in the exercise of Discipline, as the further gifts bestowed on the day of Pentecost were designed to qualify them for their office of Teachers. Viewed in this relation, I cannot but think that the gift so bestowed was the miraculous power of inflicting and removing disease, and even taking away and restoring to life. That the Apostles possessed such a power is evident from the history of Ananias and Sapphira, and from that of the sorcerer Elymas. And that they wielded this power for good, as well as for evil, is shown in numerous passages of the Acts.* The connexion of such a power with that of remitting and retaining sins was held by Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Augustine, among the Fathers, and by Grotius, Hammond, and Selden, in modern times.†

* See Acts iii. 6 ; v. 16 ; viii. 7 ; ix. 34 and 40 ; xiv. 10 ; xvi. 18.

† According to Lightfoot, it is the *sole meaning* of the powers referred

From the foregoing considerations it is, I think, apparent that the Church's power of remitting and retaining sins was conferred by the Church's Head for the purpose of discipline, and was a thing apart from God's forgiveness or condemnation of the sinner. The distinction is well drawn by the learned Hammond, in the words in which he sums up his elaborate and able treatise :—

"I conceive I have now distinctly set down the full importance of this power of binding and loosing, and how it belongs peculiarly to the public censures of the Church—the binding by way of excommunication, or depriving of the common benefits of Christians (together with that branch of corporal discipline, or inflictions on men's bodies, peculiar to the Apostle's time and power); and the loosing, in the restoring the excommunicate person upon repentance to the assembly of the saints. And by this perhaps may be received some satisfaction to that question agitated sometimes, whether absolution in the Church be only *declarative*, or moreover *ministerially authoritative*; which question will not now have so much place, the matter being thus stated. For the Church's absolution being not the actual eternal pardon of sins in Heaven, . . . but the freeing of the penitent from ecclesiastical censures here below, . . . there will be no matter of doubt,

to in John xx., which he thinks must have been different from the authority to bind and to loose, supposed by him to have been already conferred.

but as the governor of the Church, authoritatively commissioned from Christ, preacheth the Word, administereth the sacraments, and inflicts censures, so he may authoritatively too absolve on earth, free from punishments in the Church inflicted on sinners, without any necessity of interposing or meddling (save only indirectly, or as I said by way of consequence) with that which is due from God to them in another world. To which purpose 'tis ordinarily observable in the Canons of the Councils, that *a pace ecclesiaz arceri*—being driven from the peace of the Church—is the expression of being excommunicated; and *pacem dari*, is to be received into communion again. In other places we find both together—*communio pacis*,—all noting that which excommunication deprived them of to be the peace, or favour, or pardon of the Church peculiarly, and not God's peace, or pardon, or favour directly.”*

From all that has been said we conclude, that the binding and loosing, the remitting and retaining of sins, relate solely to the penalties for offences against the Church, inflicted or removed by the Church itself; and that they do not affect the eternal punishment or pardon of sin, regarded as the violation of God's holy law, except indirectly, and by way of discipline.

* Hammond, *Binding and Loosing*, iv. sect. 105.

II. *Our Lord's Commission, as understood and exercised by His Apostles.*

We have endeavoured to show, from our Lord's words as recorded by two of the Evangelists, that the Apostles were entrusted by Him with two great powers, and with a double Commission. They were commanded, firstly, to *extend throughout the world*, by the preaching of the Gospel, the spiritual kingdom which He came to establish ; and they were invested, secondly, with *authority to govern* in that kingdom by suitable laws, to be enforced by appropriate penalties.

The distinct nature of these Commissions will be more fully understood from the manner in which they were fulfilled by those to whom they were given. Let us then inquire what light is thus thrown upon them in the history of the Acts of the Apostles, and in their letters to the Churches which they had founded.

It is needless to dwell upon the mode in which the Apostles carried out the former of the two Commissions; for the history of the Acts is a continuous record of their labours to extend their Master's kingdom, by preaching His Gospel, and by making disciples. And the progress of Christianity thus initiated was, as we well know, the most wonderful revolution of which the world has been the theatre.

The evidence as to the Apostolic fulfilment of the

second Commission is to be sought in the history of the Churches which they planted. Of this the providence of God has not thought fit to leave to us any detailed narrative. We are left to gather the more prominent facts connected with the government of these Churches, and their spiritual condition, chiefly from the epistles addressed to them by their founders ; but these afford all the light which is needed for our guidance.

Before we enter upon the consideration of this evidence, we may infer one fact of great importance from the history of the plantation of the Churches; and that is, the total absence of any trace of the doctrine of priestly absolution, as defined by the Council of Trent. If the Apostles possessed the power of judicial absolution as there propounded, it is not credible that the history of their acts, brief though it be, should not have recorded some instances of its exercise. Now, not only are such instances wholly wanting, but moreover there are numerous passages which are entirely inconsistent with it. Thus, in his reply to Simon Magus, the Apostle Peter says—"Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee" (Acts viii. 22). Surely, if the Apostle possessed such a power, here was an occasion for its exercise. But no such power is put forth, or even alluded to ; and the sinner is referred for pardon directly to the throne of God. When we remember that the forgiveness of sins was the great subject of their mission—the great message from God which they

were appointed to proclaim—it is impossible to regard this negative evidence otherwise than conclusive.

Let us now consider in what manner the Apostles exercised the power “to bind and to loose,” “to forgive and to retain sins.”

The punishment of Ananias and Sapphira is the first recorded instance of the exercise of the Apostolic authority, conferred by our Lord for discipline; and the treatment of Simon Magus the second. In the latter case, the *retaining of his sin* is expressed by the Apostle when he declared that he was still “under the bond of his iniquity”—εἰς σύνδεσμον ἀδικίας. And it is observable that the offender in this case desires the Apostles to pray for him, as the penitents in the primitive Church implored the prayers of the faithful on their behalf.

But the most detailed account of the exercise of this authority is that recorded in the two epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthian Church. In the former of these we find the Apostle, in his capacity of chief minister of that Church, pronouncing sentence of excommunication upon a guilty member—“I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. v. 3-5). And in the concluding part of the chapter he points out

the great difference in his duty, and that of those to whom he was writing, towards the members of the Church, and towards them that did not belong to it—“What have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore,” he concludes, “put away from among yourselves that wicked person” (1 Cor. v. 12, 13).

Now there are two conclusions which we may draw from this narrative. The first is, that the guilty member of the Church was to be excluded from all communion: with such an one the other members of the Church are not even to eat. The second conclusion is, that the penalty imposed was, mainly, for the recovery of the fallen member—“that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” And as if to show that the rulers of the Christian Church had power to absolve, as well as to excommunicate, the Apostle at a subsequent period withdraws his sentence, and restores the offender to the Church, upon proof of his full contrition—“Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him; lest perhaps such an one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you, that ye would confirm your love toward him” (2 Cor. ii. 6–8).

The delivery unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh is interpreted, by most of the Greek Fathers, as the exercise of the miraculous power of inflicting disease,

or bodily suffering, which we know to have been possessed by the Apostles. By many of the soundest Divines, both ancient and modern, it is supposed simply to denote exclusion from the Church—the kingdom of God—and banishment into the dominion of the Evil one. “How,” says Theophylact, “did he deliver them to Satan? He cast them out of the Church; he turned them out of the sheepfold, and exposed them naked to the wolf; for, as once the cloud overshadowed the tabernacle, so doth the Spirit the Church of Christ. Therefore if any be out of the Church, he is deserted by the Spirit, and so becomes an easy prey to Satan. Such,” he adds, “is the punishment of excommunication.”* St. Jerome also speaks of the power to deliver to Satan as equivalent to excommunication.†

The penalty in this case was inflicted for gross immorality. A like punishment for false doctrine is commanded by the same Apostle in his epistle to the Galatians.—“If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. i. 9). The word in the original is *αναθεμα*—a thing set apart for evil, or excommunicated. The same Apostle excommunicated Hymenæus and Alexander, who had “made shipwreck” as concerning the faith (1 Tim. i. 20); and in his epistles to Timothy and to Titus he directs them not only to “rebuke before all . . . them that sin,” but also to “reject” the heretical, and

* Theophylact in 1 Tim. i. 20.

† Hieron. ad Heliodor. ep. 1.

not hastily to absolve them again, that they might not be partakers of other men's sins (1 Tim. v. 20; Tit. iii. 10). The former of the two passages in the epistle to Timothy here referred to is instructive, as teaching us St. Paul's view of the use of this power in the Church. The words rendered in our version—"that they may learn not to blaspheme"—might be more properly translated—"that they might be disciplined" (*ἵνα παιδευθῶσι*), and point out very clearly the corrective character of the power with which he was entrusted.

Another instance of the exercise of this authority by the same Apostle is recorded in 2 Cor. xiii., where, having twice admonished those whom he was addressing, he warns them that when he came he would not spare (verse 2), but might be compelled to use sharpness, acting on the power which the Lord had given him (verse 10)—i. e. proceed to excommunication.

Again, St. John forbids the faithful to have any intercourse with heretics—"If any come to you, and bring not this doctrine, do not receive him into your house, nor bid him God speed" (2 John 10). And from this passage is said to have arisen the practice in the early Church, not to salute those who were excommunicated.

These passages seem fully to establish the sense in which the Apostles themselves understood the words of their Master's Commission. But the negative evidence to the same purport appears to be even stronger. Apart from the *general* declaration of the remission of

sins to *all* that repent and believe (which, as we have endeavoured to show, was enjoined by a different command of Christ), the history of the Acts of the Apostles, and of the Churches which they founded, does not afford a single instance in which any sins were remitted (whether authoritatively or declaratively), but such as were *sins against the brethren*, as well as sins against God. Of this nature was the sin of the incestuous Corinthian which was remitted by St. Paul. Of this nature was *not* the sin of Simon Magus, the pardon of which God alone could confer.

But further, the same history affords no instance of the remission of individual sins, where these sins had not been previously retained ; no instance of loosing where there had been no previous binding.

These two facts seem conclusive as to the true import of our Lord's Commission. When we remember that the Apostles were foremost among those to whom that Commission was delivered by the mouth of the Son of God Himself; that it was entrusted to them with a fulness of power not granted to the Church of after ages; and, lastly, that they received, also in its fulness, the gift of the Spirit which was to lead them into the full knowledge of all that their Lord had told them ; it is not possible to suppose that they misapprehended the meaning of their Lord's words delivered to them under circumstances so solemn and affecting. And it is almost as difficult to believe that they actually exercised powers such as have been referred to, but that the instances of

such exercise have not been recorded by the inspired penmen.

Having thus endeavoured to explain the nature of the two Commissions given by Christ after His resurrection, we have next to consider to whom each was entrusted. Upon this question the former of the two presents no difficulty. It is evident from the narrative of Matthew, that it was confided exclusively to the Apostles (Matthew xxviii. 16). The case is different in regard to the latter. The account of the commission given in Matthew xviii., which is the fullest of the three, seems clearly to relegate the office to the Church at large.* On the other hand, the passage in John is, in this respect, very doubtful. The words—"As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you," (verse 21)—seem to point out that Christ intended to invest those whom He addressed with the Apostolic office. But against this it may be said, that all the Apostles were not present on the occasion; while, as appears from the narrative of the same transaction given by Luke, the assembly included others who were not Apostles.

The clearest light which we possess in reference to the question is that afforded in the two epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians; and these, undoubtedly, go far to show that both the acts of discipline—excommunication

* Upon this point, however, there is much difference of opinion among Commentators. The word Church in this passage is explained, by Chrysostom and Theophylact, to mean the *rulers of the Church* (*τοῖς ἡγούμενοις*); and in this interpretation they are followed by Hammond.

and absolution—were carried out by the Church at large, although the Apostle of course exercised a chief authority. Thus, in the first epistle to the Corinthians, the Apostle directs a formal assembly to be held for the purpose of excommunication (1 Cor. v. 4, 5); and the same reference of the matter to the entire Church appears from his directions as to the forgiveness of the offender—"Wherefore I beseech you, that ye would confirm your love towards him" (2 Cor. ii. 8); i. e. ratify it by a public act of the Church.

In accordance with this, the holy Martyr, Bishop Hooper, says—"I believe that the power to bind and loose, to excommunicate and to absolve, that is commonly called the keys of the Church, is given of God not to one or two, or to some particular person, but to the whole Church; that is to say, to all the faithful and believers in Christ. . . . And therefore I say, and confess, that excommunication and absolution ought not, neither can it be given at the lust and pleasure of some particularly, but by the consent of all the Church, or, at the least, by the greater or most sound part of the same, when they be congregated and assembled together in the name of Christ, and the same to be done with prayer."*

At the earliest periods of the Church's history this power was exercised exclusively by the Bishops, as the representatives and highest officers of the Church. And the Bishop, in fact, continued to be the person to re-

* Hooper, *Confession of the Christian Faith*, Art. 73.

admit to communion, until, by the increase of the number of penitents, he was obliged to delegate the office to a presbyter. But it is one thing to derive authority directly from Christ Himself; another, to receive it through the Church. The exaltation of the episcopal office which took place at an early period of the history of the Church, led to the adoption of the former view. Thus in the Apostolical Constitutions it is said—"To you bishops the word is spoken, 'Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven ; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven.'"^{*} St. Ambrose, who lived in the end of the fourth century, says—"Christ granted this power (of binding and loosing) to His Apostles, which from the Apostles is transmitted to the episcopal office."[†] And the same view may be traced in the writings of Chrysostom, and even of Jerome. That the latter is the doctrine of our own Church, is plain from the concluding words of the 33rd Article. And accordingly the Bishop of Ely closes his Commentary upon that Article with the words—"Herein we may recognize that Divine wisdom which ordained that, though the chief officers of the Church should be the principal executors of its authority, yet the authority should not be vested in them alone, but, with them, in the whole body of the faithful. And it may appear that as our Lord, in immediate context with the promise of ratifying Church censures and Church absolutions, promised that 'where two or three were gathered

* *Apost. Const.*, ii. 11.

† Ambr. *de paenit.* ii. 2.

together in His name, He should be in the midst of them ; so it was with a kind of synodical authority that the Apostles ordinarily armed themselves, when they administered discipline.”*

The next point to be considered is—whether, and if so, with what limitations, the authority conferred upon the Church in these commissions was to be continued to it in after ages ?

And here we have, first of all, the declaration of our Lord Himself. When He had given His Apostles their last commission, He added the memorable words :— “Lo ! I am with you always, even to the end of the world.” From these solemn words we can infer nothing less than this, that His Divine aid should never be wanting to His Church ; and that the commission which He was then giving to His Apostles, was to be continued to the lawfully-appointed Ministers of His Church in every age. And the reason of the thing leads us to the same conclusion. If the Church be a society to which God has promised, in and through His Son, certain blessings and privileges, it is both natural and fitting that its ordained ministers should be required to proclaim those promises to all its members, and to offer the promised blessings to all in their Master’s name. If the Church be a society, having the power to make laws for its government and discipline, such laws must be administered by its appointed officers.

* *Exposition of 39 Articles, Art. 33.* See also the Bishop of Salisbury’s *Bampton Lectures*.

And we find, accordingly, that the chief ministers of the Church did, at all periods of its history, exercise this double office. It was their duty to preach the glad tidings of salvation, through Christ, to all who would hear, and especially to those over whom they had been appointed spiritual overseers. And that the same officers also governed the Church, through a system of moral discipline, is evident not only from the conduct of the Apostles themselves, already referred to, but from the whole tenor of ecclesiastical history, in which Church censures, and, in the last resort, denial of Church fellowship, were frequent and usual. But with respect to both of these offices, the commission given to the Apostles extended farther than that which now appertains to the Church's ministers. As respects the first, the Apostles were not only to be *preachers*, but also *witnesses* (Luke xxiv. 48); and, in fact, this office of bearing testimony to the great facts of their Master's life, and especially His resurrection, seems to have been the highest duty assigned to them.* In like manner the Apostolic power of government and discipline was larger than any now belonging to the Church. The miraculous gifts with which the Apostles were endowed, some of which seem to have been conferred to enable them to enforce their authority, no longer belong to the Church of Christ; the operation of the ever-present Spirit is no longer manifested in the physical world by the interruption of its natural laws.

* Acts, i. 8; iv. 20; x. 41.

CHAPTER II.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

I. *Discipline of the Primitive Church.*

THE power of binding and loosing which was exercised by the Apostles, and the Churches which they founded, was continued in the Churches of succeeding times.

The first example of excommunication in the sub-apostolic age is that of Aquila of Pontus, who had been baptized at Jerusalem by the disciples of the Apostles. We learn from Epiphanius, that this learned Jew, continuing the study and practice of astrology after his admission into the Christian Church, was admonished by the doctors of the Church, and finally cast out or excommunicated, *circiter* A. D. 120, or about twenty years after the death of the last of the Apostles.* About thirty years later another instance of excommunication is recorded in the case of Cerdon, who, having been found to teach heretical doctrine, was, as we learn from Irenæus, admonished and turned out of the assembly of the faithful.† Valentinus and

* Epiph. *de Pond. et Mens.*

† Iren. iii. 4. Euseb. iv. 11.

Marcion were excommunicated at Rome in the time of Eleutherius, whose successor, Victor, not only exercised the power of excommunication in the case of the Roman Church, and in the person of Theodotus, but usurped the same power over the Eastern Bishops, whom he excommunicated for observing Easter at a different time from himself. We are thus brought to the age of Tertullian, Origen, and Cyprian (200-250), when Church censures and excommunications were frequent, and the records of them numerous.

Now these records all tend to prove that the power to remit and to retain sins, exercised by the primitive Church, related solely to discipline, and was identical with the power to bind and to loose, to excommunicate and to absolve. From their study we learn, says Marshall, "that the absolution of the Primitive Church was, for divers centuries, a correlative to public discipline; that restoring to Communion did imply its having been before detained; that giving the peace of the Church did infer the party to which it was given to have been in a state of enmity with it; that reconciliation did pre-suppose a quarrel; and that loosing could never properly be applied to any case or person where there had been no binding."* "The keys of the Church," says Spalatensis, "do not loose unless what the keys of the Church have bound: and if the Church pretends that she can extend her power of the keys to the

* Marshall, *Penitential Discipline*, p. 74 (ed. 1844).

loosing of sinners directly from the bonds of those sins by which in sinning they have bound themselves before God, she herself not having first added her own bond, she is widely mistaken; for the ecclesiastical power of loosing is correlative to that of binding.”*

The view so clearly expressed in these passages is fully maintained in the writings of the early Fathers.

“This loosing of men, by the judgment of the priest,” writes Archbishop Ussher, “is by the Fathers generally accounted nothing else but a restoring of them to the peace of the Church, and an admitting of them to the Lord’s table again: which therefore they usually express by the terms of ‘*bringing them to the Communion—restoring the Communion to them—admitting them to fellowship—granting them peace,*’” &c.† And Archbishop Wake, in his exposition of the doctrines of the Church of England, says—“The primitive Christians, interpreting these passages of St. Matthew and St. John of public discipline, and *to which we suppose, with them, they principally at least, if not only refer,* at first practised no other.”‡

As regards the effect of the Church’s absolution, the early Christians believed that God’s forgiveness of a sinner was granted at the moment of repentance, and

* Spalat. *de repub. eccles.* lib. 5.

† Ussher, *Answer to a Jesuit*, iii. 137.

‡ Wake, *Doctrines of the Church of England*, Art. xiii.

that the Church's absolution did not relate directly to the pardon of sin, but to the restoration of the sinner to the Church from which he had been excluded. Even Cyprian, whose views of the authority of the Church were unusually exalted, is explicit in ascribing the pardon of the sinner solely to the mercy of God. "Let no man be mistaken," he writes—"none deceive himself; God alone can show mercy and forgiveness. He alone can pardon the sins committed against Himself, who hath Himself borne our sins, who suffered for us, and whom God hath delivered for our sins."*

But a careful examination of the Church's history, and of the Church's ritual, in relation to the penitential discipline, teaches more than this: for it is by such means only that we can unravel the tangled thread of doctrinal error. The doctrine of the Church in regard to absolution followed, instead of guiding, its practice; and it is only by a close examination of the changes in its ritual, many of which were adopted on the ground of expediency alone, that we can arrive at a clear conception of the mutations of belief on this fundamental question. To enter fully upon such an examination would be a work of vast labour, and demand much detail. I shall only attempt, in these pages, to present such a sketch of the history of the penitential discipline as will exhibit its principal changes, and their reflex effects upon doctrine.

* Cyprian, *de lapsis.*

The errors of the Mediæval Church, in relation to penance and absolution, were of slower growth than its other aberrations in doctrine and practice. Although the discipline of penance was, from a very early period, overladen with observances unknown in Apostolic times, still, in the main, the Apostolic precepts in reference to excommunication and absolution were generally followed, and the truth of Apostolic doctrine in relation to it preserved, for nearly 400 years.

The discipline of penance is referred to by Clemens Romanus, and Hermas, as practised in their time.

Clement, who was Bishop of Rome in the first century, and a disciple of the Apostles themselves, exhorts the Corinthians, to whom he is writing, to submit to discipline, and he explains that discipline to consist in casting out of the fold of Christ.*

Hermas, the author of the Shepherd,† a writing at one time accepted as Scripture, is more explicit. In his third vision, the angel shows Hermas a tower which is in course of construction, and tells him that this tower is the Church, and that the stones of which it is composed are the Church's living members. Hermas then inquires, what are those stones which are rejected, and put aside? and he is answered that they are those who

* Clem. *ep. ad Corinth.* 57.

† It seems to be now generally acknowledged, mainly upon the authority of the Muratorian fragment, that Hermas, the author of the Shepherd, was the brother of Pius I., and wrote during his episcopate (circ. A. D. 140). See, upon this subject, an able essay by Dr. Salmon on the chronology of Hippolytus, *Hermathena*, i.

have sinned, and should undergo penitence. And on this account they are not far removed from the building; for, after penitence, they may fitly be used in the edifice.* There is much more in this writer to like effect; and the “angel of penitence” even gives specific rules in certain cases as to the mode in which offenders are to be dealt with.

Irenæus, who lived in the second century, speaks distinctly of the practice of the exomologesis,† and Origen and Tertullian are full and explicit in their account of the discipline.‡ St. Chrysostom connects it distinctly with the words of our Lord’s Commission, recorded by St. Matthew.§

That the practice of this discipline was regarded as one of the regular and necessary duties of the primitive Church, we learn from Tertullian. In his *Apology* he tells us that the Churches met in their assemblies to offer up their united supplications to God; to read the Scriptures; to deliver exhortations; and to pronounce censures, cutting off from communion in prayer, and in every holy exercise, those who had been guilty of any flagrant offence.

* Hermas, *Pastor*, i., vis. 3. † Iren. i., cap. 13.

‡ Orig. *contra Cels.* iii. Tertul. *Apol. adv. gent.* 39.

§ δῆσατε ἀφορισμῷ τοὺς μετὰ τὸ Βάπτισμα ἀμαρτήσαντας, καὶ λύσατε αὐτοὺς πάλιν μετανοῦντας, ὡς ἀδελφοὺς αὐτοὺς προσδεχόμενοι. ἀληθῆς γαρ ἐστι ὁ λόγος, Ὅσα ἀν λύσητε ἵπε τῆς γῆς, ἐσται λελυμένα ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ.—Chrysos. *Hom. in Matt.* xviii.

In the earlier ages of the Church, this discipline was mild and merciful. This may be gathered from the command of the angel of repentance to Hermas, in the case of the offence for which the Church afterwards imposed the severest penalties. The account given in the *Apostolical Constitutions* of the mode of dealing with offenders shows that Church discipline, at the time of their composition, had not attained the degree of severity which it afterwards reached. The deacons were directed to mourn over the separated sinner; to watch him, and to pray for him. The penitent is afterwards to be examined as to his repentance: and, if deemed deserving of restoration, to be punished by the imposition of fasts of two or more weeks' duration, according to the nature of the offence. After this he is to be *loosed* or *absolved*. “Thus it behoves you to act—namely, to separate for a time proportioned to the offence those who declare themselves penitent; and afterwards to receive them again, as fathers receiving repentant sons.”* The duration of the penance itself was, in these ages, never defined; and even in the time of Cyprian we find that Father complaining of the practice of the readmission of offenders to Communion without penance.”†

The whole penitential discipline, as practised in the earlier ages of the Church, consisted of—1. the *public confession* of the penitent (*εξομολόγησις*); 2. the *segregation*, or separation from the other members of the

* *Apost. Const.* ii. 16.

† Cyprian. *de Lapsis*, ep. 10.

Church in the public worship (*αφορισμός*); and 3. the *absolution* (*λύσις*), or readmission to Communion.

The second of these stages, during which the offender was separated from the body of the faithful, was more especially that of discipline or penance. The offences for which it was incurred were grave and notorious sins, by which the whole Church was scandalized. Thus, Augustine says that none are to be bound by the Church, but such as had been publicly convicted of some grievous offence, or such as had voluntarily confessed the same.* The sins for which the public penance was inflicted were finally reduced to the three—Idolatry, murder and uncleanness.

The order of reconciliation of penitents is laid down in the 19th canon of the Council of Laodicæa. After the dismissal of the Catechumens, the penitents were directed to approach, one of the deacons calling on the faithful to pray for them. After this followed the prayer called “manus impositio et oratio pro iis qui sunt in pœnitentiâ.” In this the Bishop prayed to God that He would grant true repentance to those who bent the necks of their soul and body to Him; that He

* “*Nos vero a communione prohibere quenquam non possumus (quamvis haec prohibitio nondum sit mortalis, sed medicinalis), nisi aut sponte confessum, aut in aliquo sive sæculari, sive ecclesiastico judicio nominatum atque convictum.*”—*Augustin. Hom. 50.*

Origen says—“*Ubi peccatum non est evidens ejicere de ecclesiâ neminem possumus, ne forte eradicantes zizania, eradiceremus simul cum ipsis etiam triticum.*”—*Orig. in Jos. Hom. 2.*

would pardon their sins, and restore them to the Church.*

Thus absolution was the act of readmission of the sinner to Church fellowship; and the ceremony which accompanied it consisted in the imposition of the hands of the Bishop and Clergy, and in prayer to God for His forgiveness, in which prayer the whole congregation joined. The whole procedure was public; and publicity was in fact of its very essence.†

In one case, and in one case only, was absolution granted without penitential discipline previously performed—namely, in the case of those who were in immediate danger of death. As adults were admitted to baptism, in the like case, without passing through the stage of Catechumens, so were offenders readmitted into the Church by absolution, upon the engagement to perform that discipline if they recovered.

In this simple, but expressive transaction, the intercession of the Church was offered to obtain the pardon of sin, which God alone could bestow, while the sinner was released from the censure of the Church by the act of readmission to Communion.

Tertullian expressly distinguishes between the pardon of God, and remission of sins by the Church; and

* The details of this ceremony are given in the *Apostolical Constitutions*, viii. 5, 6, 7.

† Spalatensis says—“Ecclesiasticam itaque veram poenitentiam planè constat in totâ antiquitate aliam non fuisse nisi publicam, nullam privatam.”—*De rep. Christ.* vii. 40.

affirms that the sincere penitent, although he may not by his tears and lamentations obtain readmission into the Church, may yet secure his reception into the kingdom of Heaven.* And Augustine, long after, wrote to the same effect.†

That this *loosing* by the Church was held to be distinct from the forgiveness of sin as against God, appears further from the fact, that to those who had relapsed, no second public penance—no second absolution, whether public or private—was allowed by the ancient Church, although, at the same time, such persons were exhorted to *private repentance, and private confession to God*. Tertullian, in his tract “*De Pœnitentiâ*,” written before he became a Montanist, says that all crimes committed after baptism may once, but once only, be pardoned by the Church upon repentance. St. Ambrose says—“As there is one baptism, so there is one penance.”‡ St. Augustine writes to the same effect.§ And accordingly the Council of Elvira, the third Council of Toledo, and others, expressly forbid the repetition of the penitential discipline, while, at the same time, relapsers

* “*Et si pacem hic non metit, apud Dominum seminat.*”—*De pudicitia*, c. 3.

† “*Quamvis eis in Ecclesiâ locus humillimæ penitentie non concedatur, Deus tamen super eos suæ patientie non obliviscitur.*”—Augustin. *ep. ad Maced.*

‡ “*Sicut unum baptismum, ita una pœnitentia, quæ tamen publicè agitur.*”—Ambr. *de pœnit.* ii. 10.

§ “*Cautè salubriterque provisum, ut locus illius humillimæ penitentie semel in ecclesiâ concedatur, ne medecina viliis minus utilis easet ægrotis.*”—Augustin. *epist. 153.*

were exhorted to repent, in the hope of obtaining pardon from God.

These views of the power of the priest in relation to forgiveness are in entire accordance with the doctrine taught by the early Fathers. Irenæus adduces our Lord's claim to forgive sins, to prove that He was God.* And St. Chrysostom and St. Athanasius urge the same argument. St. Ambrose, speaking of the remission of sins, says—"This is no human work, neither is the Holy Ghost given by man: but being invoked by the priest, He is bestowed by God. The gift is God's, the ministry alone belongs to the priest. For if the Apostle Paul judged that he could not confer the Holy Ghost authoritatively, . . . who shall dare to arrogate to himself the power to bestow such a gift? The Apostle offered up his desire in prayer; he claimed no authoritative right to it: he desired to obtain it; he did not presume to command it."†

* Iren. *adv. hæres.*, v. 17.

† "Non enim humanum hoc opus, neque ab homine datur: sed invocatur a sacerdote, a Deo traditur. In quo Dei munus, ministerium sacerdotis est. Nam si Paulus Apostolus judicavit, quod ipse donare Spiritum Sanctum suā autoritate non posset; et in tantum se huic officio imparem credidit, ut a Deo nos spiritu optaret impleri, quis tantus est, qui hujus traditionem muneris sibi audeat arrogare? Itaque Apostolus votum precatione detulit, non jus autoritate aliquā vindicavit: impetrare optavit, non imperare præsumpsit."—Ambr. *De Spiritu Sancto*, i., c. 8. In his treatise *de Pénitentia* this Father explains the priestly office in the release of the sinner somewhat differently. Referring to the command of Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus to remove the stone, he says—"nostrum

The most formidable schisms by which the early Church was rent were those which related to its power of absolving penitents, Montanus, and after him Novatian, forbidding to re-admit to Communion those who had lapsed under persecution, or been guilty of the graver sins. But the greater part took the more lenient view of the Church's duty, for which there was ample warrant in the dealing of the Apostle with the incestuous Corinthian. The argument of Ambrose is conclusive to the same effect. He urges that our Lord had given to His Church the power of loosing equally with that of binding ; and that if the former power be denied in any particular case, the latter is also excluded.* Yet, with an inconsistency not uncommon in human conduct, those who took the lenient view excommunicated their opponents !

But the agitation of this question left its deep traces in the Canons of the Church. After the Novatian schism, although the door for the readmission of penitents to the peace of the Church was widened, yet the whole process of restoration was made more elaborate and difficult. The rules of the penitential discipline, heretofore in a great degree arbitrary, were rendered more definite, as well as more severe. The readmission to Communion was separated from the act of reconcilia-

est onera removere, Illius est resuscitare; Illius educere de sepulchro extutus vinculis."—*De paenit.* ii. 7.

* Ambros. *de paenit.* i. 2.

tion, with which it was originally identified,* and was deferred for one or more years of probation. Penitents were separated from the main body of worshippers in the Church; a station was assigned to them, as to the catechumens; and they were obliged to depart along with the latter before the Communion.

The stations assigned to penitents were distinguished at a later period. The first station was that of *mourners*, who were excluded from the entire service, and required to stand at the church door. They were next to be admitted to the station of *hearers*, within the church. After these came the station of the *prostrate*, the chief station of penance; and finally that of the *consistentes*, who were permitted to stand with the faithful, but not themselves to communicate.†

Finally, the duration of the penance itself was enormously increased. St. Basil, in his Canons, prescribes a penance of fifteen years for certain sins; and Gregory Nyssen extended it in some cases to twenty-seven years—the probable duration of the longest life! That all this was a departure from the practice of the Apostolic Church is admitted even by Morinus.

The extreme views with regard to discipline in the Primitive Church, here referred to, and the severities and shame which the early Christians were found willing to

* “Antiquissimis illis temporibus, absolutio ab Eucharistiâ non separabatur.”—Morinus *de sacer. penit.* x. i. 11.

† The four stations of penitents are mentioned in several of the Canons of the Synod of Ancyra, held A. D. 314.

undergo in order to be reconciled to it, are to be explained by the tenet (natural in those times) that there was no salvation out of the Church. This doctrine is expressly stated by Cyprian.*

The Decrees of the Councils of the second and third centuries throw much light upon the character of the penitential discipline of the Primitive Church. It is true that the earliest Synods of the Church were summoned to settle theological and liturgical questions. Thus the Synods of the second century were convened to dispose of the heresy of Montanus, and to decide the controversy as to the time of the celebration of Easter. The Synod held at Carthage (A. D. 251) was assembled by Cyprian to determine upon what conditions the lapsed were to be received again into the Church, and its Canons may be regarded as the first which related to discipline. The Synod of Elvira (A. D. 305) was exclusively of this character.† Its Canons, several of which were adopted into the *corpus juris canonici*, are of extreme severity, many of them ordering the last penalty which the Church can inflict for transgression—"nec in finem accipiat communio-

* "Quisquis ille est, et qualiscumque est, Christianus non est qui in Christi ecclesiâ non est."—Cypr. *ad Anton.* 55. And again:—"Nemini salus esse, nisi in ecclesiâ possit."—Cypr. *ad Pompon.* ep. 4 et 11.

† There is much difference of opinion among ecclesiastical writers as to the date of this Synod, Morinus placing it before the year 250, while the Magdeburg centuriators place it in the year 700. The date above given is that adopted by Hefele, after an elaborate discussion of the views of other historians.

nem.” The first of them forbids communion to the lapsed, even *in articulo mortis*; but many of them deal with the grosser carnal offences, the enumeration of which gives such a disgusting character to the mediæval penitentials. The Synod of Arles, which assembled in Gaul a few years later (A. D. 314), and to which nearly all the divisions of the Western Church sent representatives, was of the same character. These penalties were mitigated by the decrees of later Synods. Thus the penance imposed by the Council of Nice on those who had apostatised was three years in the station of the *hearers*, and ten years among the *prostrate*.*

* *Concil. Nicen.* can. 12.

II. Discipline of the Mediæval Church.

The penitential discipline was originally imposed upon those members of the Church who were openly convicted, or notoriously guilty of some scandalous offence. “If,” writes Augustine, “the sin of the offender doth not only redound to his own hurt, but also to the scandal of others, and the bishop deem it expedient for the good of the Church, let him not refuse to perform his penance in the presence of many, or even of the whole people.”*

But at a very early period the practice of voluntary penance for secret sins crept in; and it was in the Church’s dealings with them that the variations in her practice arose. Secret sins were at first confessed to some priest, whose duty it was to judge whether they were such as to demand public penance, or not. Origen is full and explicit in his recommendation of this practice, accompanying the recommendation, however, with some salutary warnings as to its use. It is likewise commended by Tertullian, Cyprian, and Ambrose. On the other hand, Chrysostom and Augustine disparage the practice. The language of the former of these Fathers is very strong in its condemnation.—“I do not seek,” he says, “to drive you upon the public stage in the presence of your fellow-servants; nor do I compel you

* Augustin. *serm.* 351.

to unfold your sins to men. Open your heart before God, and show Him its wounds; and seek their remedy from Him.”*

In this practice the penitent, at first, chose his own confessor. But the number of the lapsed in the Decian persecution led to the appointment of a special officer† in each church to receive the confessions of the penitents. In all cases, however, such private confessions had relation to public discipline, which the voluntary penitent underwent along with notorious offenders, if, in the judgment of the priest, his sins were such as to demand public humiliation. This relation of private to public confession is distinctly laid down in the writings of Origen.

As respects the public confession in the case of voluntary penitents, the practice of the Western Church appears to have been, at first, to read out in the Church a general description of the crimes privately confessed, instead of requiring the penitent himself to enumerate them in detail. This practice continued until the time

* Chrysos. *Dei natura*, hom. 5. That the penalty of excommunication was originally inflicted only for notorious and scandalous offences, appears also from the Canons of the Councils of Carthage, which ordain—“That no bishop shall rashly or lightly deprive any one of the Communion, nor for any fault known only to him by private confession.”—*Concil. Carthag.* can. 134.

† Πρεσβύτερος ἵπι τῆς μετανοίας. This office was abolished by Nectarius, who was Bishop of Constantinople A.D. 391, after it had lasted 140 years. Its history is given by the ecclesiastical writers, Socrates and Sozomen.

of Leo the Great, who entered upon his pontificate A. D. 440. By his decree this qualified publication of the sins of voluntary penitents was abandoned, and secret confession to the priest, in the case of secret sins, pronounced to be sufficient.*

This change naturally led to a change of doctrine as to the Church's absolution. That absolution, we have seen, was the act of restoration of the offender to the communion of the faithful, accompanied by the intercession of the Church for God's forgiveness. But in the case of *secret sins* which involved no public scandal, and of communion voluntarily relinquished, the offence to the Church did not exist, and her pardon was therefore not required. Thus the former part of the act was lost sight of, and the whole aim of the penitent seemed to be to obtain the Church's intercession with God in his behalf. The Church's absolution thus came to be regarded in relation to *sins against God* alone; and when public confession ceased, and private confession became the rule of the Church, this view of the nature of absolution became general.

Notwithstanding this change of aspect, the ancient discipline was still maintained as regards public and notorious sins, although mitigated in its application, until the time of Gregory the Great (A. D. 590). This is shown by the decrees of the Councils of the sixth

* "Sufficit illa confessio, quæ primum Deo offertur, tum etiam sacerdoti, qui pro delictis penitentium precator accedit."—Leo, *Epist. 80.*

century.* But from the writings of Gregory we learn that in his time Church discipline was much relaxed, and that all his efforts failed to restore it.

About two centuries later a further change was made in the penitential discipline, which strengthened and confirmed this view. This important change was introduced by Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, A. D. 670. Before his time, we have seen, the public confession of secret sins had been abandoned; but public penance remained. Theodore introduced the practice of *private penance* for *secret sins*; and he even prepared a *formulary* for its due observance, the penitential discipline for such sins being imposed by the Presbyters, while that for the former was reserved to the Bishops. It is needless to dwell upon the effect of this change of ritual upon doctrine. Private confession, and private penance, being thus established, private absolution necessarily followed. The whole transaction thus became a secret one, unknown to all but to the sinner himself, and to his confessor; and the Church's share in it was lost sight of and forgotten. About the same time other relaxations were made in the public penitential discipline. The third station of penance (*substratio*) was given up, and penitents were allowed to be present during Communion, although not partakers.

The same Archbishop is said to have been the author

* *Concil. Ilerd.* A. D. 524. *Concil. Aurel.* A. D. 507, 540. *Concil. Tolet.* 2, A. D. 580. *Concil. Bracar.* 1, A. D. 563.

of another practice, which ultimately corrupted the discipline of penance, and finally led to its abandonment by a large section of the Christian Church. The Bishop had, at all times, full power to curtail, or to add to, the duration of penance, according to the conduct of the penitent himself; and the practice was made a law of the Church by the twelfth Canon of the Nicene Council. Now, from an early period, penitents were encouraged to bestow alms, as a suitable act of contrition; and it is easy to understand in what manner their conduct in this particular might, in process of time, come to be regarded as an evidence of the sincerity of their repentance, and therefore as a justification of an abridgment of the term of penance. All this was reduced to rule by Theodore. Gifts to the Church, or to its members, were accepted in lieu of bodily austerities; and the corrupting practice of the commutation of penance was established, which eventually led to the Reformation.

At the same time that these relaxations in the discipline of penance took place, the discipline itself was systematized by means of the *penitentials*, which prescribed the whole order of procedure.* This usually

* The earliest of these *penitentials* was that composed by John, patriarch of Constantinople, A. D. 586. This was followed in the West by the penitential of Theodore above referred to. These works are of considerable interest in reference to the history of absolution, inasmuch as they prove, beyond a doubt, that the forms of absolution were then precatory only. A change had indeed been effected in the penitential discipline, which ultimately subverted its entire character; but until

commenced with the interrogation of the priest, as to the belief of the penitent in the fundamental articles of the Christian Faith, as well as to his forgiveness of all who had sinned against him. If the answers to these interrogatories were satisfactory, the priest was to receive the confession of the penitent; and in some Churches an elaborate form was prescribed for these confessions, including all conceivable crimes. The priest then prayed for the penitent; after which followed the absolution. In many of these penitentials there is given the *judicium Penitentiae*, or the sentences fixing the duration of the penance for the several crimes. Of these there are, in one of these books,* as many as fifty-nine distinct sentences, some of which describe crimes which may not be mentioned.

The assumption by the Church of the cognizance and punishment of secret sins now led to a distinction, by the schoolmen, of the keys of the Church into the *key of jurisdiction*, and the *key of order*, the former having relation to canonical offences, and the latter to sins pri-

then, and for some hundred years later, the authoritative form of absolution was unknown in the Church of Christ.

* The *Codex Floriacencis*. Marshall closes his account of these penitentials with the words—"This will suffice to give the reader some notion of the old penitential formularies, and to convince him that the office of the priest was hitherto that of mediator, or intercessor; as well as that all absolutions, whether public or private, were evermore relative to a course of penance, either in public or in private; and did suppose the right and privilege of Communion had been forfeited, and were thereby restored."—Marshall, *penit. discip.* p. 219.

vately confessed. And as the dealing of the Church with the latter had been, almost from the first, consigned to the Presbyters, so now the Bishops transferred the control of public offences—the key of jurisdiction—to lay Commissaries appointed by themselves. Such was the origin of the Bishops' Courts, the functions of which have varied from time to time with the relations of Church and State. These changes appear to have occurred about the close of the 12th century. The distinction is set forth with scholastic precision in the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas, and shows very clearly how far the Mediæval Church had departed from the views of the Primitive Church in relation to excommunication and absolution.

In the ninth century, the discipline of penance became greatly relaxed in severity,* and in the tenth and eleventh, penance, as well as absolution, lost altogether its original significance, and came to be regarded, not as the discipline of the penitent, nor as the means of his restoration to the peace of the Church, as in the earlier ages of Christianity, but as an assurance to him of God's forgiveness.† Public penance for notorious offences became less frequent, while, on the other hand, private confession and private penance were more

* Of this decline Martene writes—"Fatendum est ecclesiasticam hanc in materiam disciplinam, si non omnem prorsus, maximam saltem jacturam passam esse; jamque a saeculo nono penitentiae publicae vigorem pene, omnino decidisse."—*De antiqu. ecol. rit.* i. 6.

† Robertson. *History of Christian Church*, ii. 541.

generally insisted on; until, finally, private confession was rendered obligatory upon all by the decree of the fourth Lateran Council, A. D. 1215.* The progress of false views with regard to the forgiveness of sins was henceforward rapid. A few years only elapsed from the time last mentioned, when it was decreed that *attrition*, joined with *penance*, was sufficient to ensure the pardon of God.

It is interesting, however, to find, even at so late a period, just and evangelical views expressed occasionally by some of the foremost men in the Mediæval Church. Thus Thomas Aquinas says that "to absolve from sin is the same thing as to remit sin. Yet God alone remits sin; for He alone can cleanse the inner man from sin."† And he defines the part of the priest in the forgiveness of sin to be not authoritative, but ministerial only. The intercessory character of the office of the priest is distinctly marked in a prayer of an ancient Roman office quoted by Ussher; and it was maintained by Bonaventura that the power of the keys extended to the remission of sins *only by deprecation*.

The Western Church had now, as regards the forgiveness of sin, receded nearly to the farthest possible

* "Omnis utriusque sexus fidelis, postquam ad annos discretionis per venerit, omnia sua solus peccata confiteatur fideliter, saltem semel in anno, proprio sacerdoti!"—Labbè *Concil.* vol. xxviii. p. 1008.

† "Idem est absolvere a peccato, quod peccatum remittere. Sed solus Deus peccatum remittit, qui etiam solus interius hominem a peccato mundat."—Thos. Aquin. *Sum. Theol.*

distance from the Primitive Church. Private confession to a priest, which was unknown in the Church of the Apostles, but recommended by some of the Fathers in the case of grave offences with a view to the public exomologesis, was now rendered compulsory, and extended to the minutest details of conduct, and even to the innermost thoughts. Penance, which at first was instituted for the humiliation and reformation of the offender, was now assumed to be instrumental in earning the favour of God. And, finally, absolution, which in the Primitive Church was the act of restoration of the offending brother to the communion which he had forfeited, became the instrument in the hands of the priest for the conveyance of God's forgiveness.* “The

* Thus Bellarmine says :—“ Christus instituit sacerdotes judices super terram, cum eâ potestate ut, sine ipsorum sententiâ, nemo post baptismum lapsus reconciliari possit.” And he finds this unscriptural dogma upon the words of our Lord’s Commission to His Apostles, in John xx. ; the promise of which, he says, would be otherwise untrue.—Bellarm. *de paenitentia*, iii. cap. 2.

According to the views of Bellarmine, and others of the Roman Catholic Church, absolution is a sacramental act, which conveys instrumentally the grace of justification—“ Active, et proxime, atque instrumentaliter efficit gratiam justificationis.”—Bellarm. *de sacramentis*, ii. 1. And again—“ Ut fatus extinguit ignem, et dissipat nebulas, sic etiam absolutio sacerdotis peccata dispergit et evanescere facit.”—Bellarm. *de penit. iii. 2.*

Baronius thus sums up the doctrine :—

“ Igitur in horum arbitrio munus solvendi et ligandi, et remittendi et retinendi peccata hominum, a Christo Domino, per Spiritum Sanctum fuisse positum, liquido constat.”—Baron. *Annal. i. 34.*

Church of Rome at this day teaches," writes Archbishop Wake, "that by virtue of those words—‘to whomsoever you forgive,’ &c., the priests are established judges in the tribunal of penance—yea such judges by virtue of their character, that without their absolution *in re aut in rotu*, it is impossible to obtain remission of sins."*

In another particular, also, the Church of Rome set aside and overturned the ancient practice. I will give this in the words of Marshall, a candid and learned writer, whose work was written in the hope of restoring some portion of the primitive discipline. "The ancient," he says, "is quite reversed in the modern practice of the Roman Church. The binding power of the Church was heretofore understood to be then exercised, when the sinner was bound over to certain penitential austerities; and when these had been submitted to for the appointed season, he was then loosed from them, and restored to his former privileges. But now, in effect, he is loosed first, and bound afterwards; it being usual with the Roman clergy to give absolution immediately after confession, upon promise from the penitent that he will perform the penance assigned him when so absolved."†

One further step only remained. This was to make secret confession to the priest necessary to salvation.

* Wake. *Exposition of Articles of the Church of England.*

† Marshall, *Penitential Discipline*, p. 118.

This step was taken by the Council of Trent, which excommunicated all who dared to deny the dogma.*

I have thus endeavoured to mark the changes in the doctrine of the Church's forgiveness, as they arose from the changes in her ritual—transformations so complete as to subvert altogether its original character. In the Primitive Church, we have seen, absolution had relation, primarily, to discipline. No member of the community was absolved, who had not previously been excommunicated; and both excommunication and absolution, together with the public penance which intervened, were reserved for the gravest offences. But when the public exomologesis, and the public reconciliation of the offender to the Church, were replaced by private confession and private absolution, and the whole transaction thus rendered a secret one between the offender and his confessor, the offence against the Church was lost sight of, and the graver aspect of sin, as an offence against God, necessarily came into view. And this transition was the more natural, owing to the circumstance that the prayer for God's forgiveness of the penitent, which in the primitive form of absolution accompanied his restoration to communion, was preserved in the altered form, and in fact became its essence. It is true that in

* "Si quis negaverit confessionem sacramentalem vel institutam, vel ad salutem necessariam esse jure Divino; aut dixerit modum secretè confitendi soli sacerdoti, quem Ecclesia Catholica ab initio semper observavit et observat, alienum esse ab institutione et mandato Christi. et inventum esse humanum, anathema sit."—*Concil. Triad. can. 6.*

later times words were added to the form, to mark the restoration of the sinner to the peace of the Church ; but, nevertheless, its original characteristic remained under every change of form, and could not fail to convey the idea, that the act of the priest was instrumental in procuring the pardon of God.

All this transition was easy and natural, and probably took place at first without design. But when the sacerdotal spirit attained its full development in the thirteenth century, it found, in private confession and private absolution, an engine admirably adapted to its purposes ; and, by the decrees of the Council of Lateran, the instrument was appropriated, and rendered more efficacious for its new work. And at length the new conceptions as to the nature of confession and absolution, thus developed, became crystallized into dogmas of the so-called infallible Church by the decrees of the Council of Trent; and excommunication itself was hurled against all who dared to deny them.

III. *Form of Absolution.*

We cannot leave this part of the subject without a reference to the much debated topic of the absolution formula.

In the Primitive Church, we have seen, absolution was the act of readmission of the penitent to Communion ; and the act was accompanied by the prayer of the Bishop for God's forgiveness, in which prayer all the congregation joined. And this was based upon the practice of the Apostles themselves, in which, as testified by St. Luke, prayer and the imposition of hands were constantly connected.* Many of the earliest Fathers testify that prayers always accompanied the imposition of hands, in the absolution of the penitent. Thus St. Augustine identifies the imposition of hands and prayer,† and the Apostolical Constitutions enjoin—" As after instruction you admit the Gentile by Baptism, so by the imposition of hands restore him when purified by repentance, all praying for him."‡ And again :—" Receive the penitent, the whole Church offering prayers on his behalf, and by the imposition of hands restore him to the Church."§

* *Acts vi. 7; xiii. 3; viii. 15-17; xxviii. 8.*

† " Quid est aliud manus impositio, nisi oratio supra hominem."—*De baptismo*, iii. 16.

‡ *Apost. Const.* ii. 41.

§ *Ibid.* ii. 18.

But prayers, accompanied by the imposition of hands, were offered upon the occasion of the admission of the sinner to penance, and frequently throughout the penitential discipline itself, as well as at its close. In fact, prayers for the several orders of catechumens, and for the penitents, constituted a regular part of the Liturgy, after which both classes were dismissed, and the Faithful proceeded to the more solemn portions of the Eucharistic Office. The following prayer for penitents given in the Apostolical Constitutions,* is the most ancient relic of the penitential service which we possess. The translation is Marshall's:—

“ Almighty and eternal God, Lord of the Universe, Creator and Governor of all things, who, through Thy Son Jesus Christ, hast cleansed man, and made him the ornament of this lower world; and hast given him a law in his heart, as well as a written word, that he might live according to Thy will, as becomes a reasonable creature; and after he had sinned didst extend Thy goodness towards him to lead him to repentance:—Thou, who desirest not the death of a sinner, but wouldest rather that he should turn from his evil way and live, look graciously upon these Thy servants, who here bow down themselves before Thee in humiliation and repentance:—Thou, who didst accept the repentance of the Ninevites turning to Thee; who wouldest have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of Thy

* *Constit. Apost.* viii. 9.

truth :—Thou, who didst receive with a fatherly compassion Thy prodigal son, though he had spent all his substance in riotous living, seeing at last that he was sorry for his sin, receive in like manner, we most humbly beseech Thee, the supplications of those who turn now unto Thee in penitential tears; for there is none amongst us who sinneth not against Thee and in Thy sight, and if Thou, Lord, shouldest be extreme to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who may abide with Thee? But there is mercy with Thee. Restore these to the bosom of Thy Holy Church, and to the place and station which they before held in it, through Jesus Christ our Saviour, by whom, in the Holy Ghost, be all honour and adoration ascribed to Thee, world without end. Amen.”

The foregoing prayer was constantly used in the assemblies for public worship, and after it the Deacon proclaimed—“Depart all you who are in the station of penance.” The εὐχὴ τοῦ ἀστικοῦ, in the liturgy ascribed to St. James, seems to have held a similar place in the penitential service. Like the former, it is, from first to last, a prayer.

The prayer, which accompanied the act of readmission of the penitent, came in process of time to be regarded as the essence of the rite.* The form of words

* Thus Leo the Great, writing to Timotheus, Bishop of Alexandria, says—“eos qui veritati aliquatenus restiterunt, reconciliandos Deo per preces Ecclesiae instanter requiras.”—Leo, *epist.* 139.

employed became *the absolution*; and thus the formula was, from the first, precatory.

The early Fathers do not give their forms of absolution in their writings, although they refer to them as existing; for they regarded them as mysteries of the Faith, which might not be divulged to those without. It is more than probable, however, that the spirit of those now lost survives in the forms of a later age. That these were deprecatory there can be no doubt: the testimony of Morinus is explicit on this point.*

The forms of absolution contained in the Penitential of Johannes Jejunator (Bishop of Constantinople, A. D. 585) are the earliest to which a certain date can be assigned, although it is probable that many of them are taken, in part at least, from earlier sources. They are remarkable for the fervency of their precatory language.

The Penitential of Theodorus, Archbishop of Canterbury, A. D. 670, contains eight forms of absolution, and that of Egbert, Archbishop of York, A. D. 731, contains six, all precatory. Some of these were handed down from an earlier period. Thus the Collect which follows the absolution in the Visitation of the Sick, which is contained in Egbert's Penitential, was taken by him from the Sacramentary of Gelasius, who was Bishop of Rome A. D. 494.

* “*Formulam ordinariam absolutionis, sive reconciliationis Penitentium, fuisse deprecatoriā testantur quotquot hactenus legi, aut relata audivi, antiquitatis ecclesiastice monumenta ad annum usque salutis ducentesimum supra millesimum.*”—Morinus, *de pen.* viii. 8.

The forms of absolution contained in the last-mentioned penitential of the Anglo-Saxon Church comprise some that are remarkable. The following brief and expressive form is already familiar to us:—

“O Lord, hear our prayers, and spare all those who confess their sins unto Thee; that they whose consciences by sin are accused, by Thy merciful pardon may be absolved, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

One of the forms in the Penitential of Johannes Jejunator already referred to is important, for the evidence which it affords of the sense in which the passage in John xx. was accepted by the early Church.

“O God, our Lord and Governor, who didst present Thyself to Thy disciples when the doors were shut, after having said, ‘Peace be unto you. Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained’:—Do Thou, O Lord God, according to that invisible Almighty power wherewith Thou presidest over all things, graciously look upon this Thy servant, and by my ministry, though I am myself a grievous sinner, wash away his guilt, and remove the causes through which he hath contracted it. That he who is bound by the discipline of the Church may be loosed from the sin which brought him under it; through Thy grace and compassion, O merciful God, whose Holy Name, Father, Son, and blessed Spirit, be praised and magnified now and for evermore.”*

* Marshall, *Penitential discipline*, p. 209.

And the reference to the Church's power of binding and loosing, of forgiving and retaining sins, in these precatory forms is frequent; thus showing that those who composed them did not regard these words of Christ as conveying any right to forgive sins as against God. The following absolution, extracted from an ancient Pontifical given by Martene,* may be taken as an example:—

“ May the omnipotent Son of God, who hath the power of forgiving sins, and who forgave the sins of the thief on the cross and brought him into Paradise, and of Peter, to whom he gave the power of binding and loosing in Heaven and earth, and who hath said to His other disciples—‘ Whose sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whose sins ye retain, they are retained’—May He Himself, of His great mercy, absolve thee from all thy sins,” &c., &c.

At the commencement of the twelfth century, the indicative began to be added to the deprecatory form.† The theory of absolution which is presupposed in the use of this compound form is very clearly enunciated by Alexander Halensis. By prayer, the priest asks

* Martene, *de antiq. eccl. rit.* p. 292.

† Morinus *de pen.* viii. 9. We can trace the use of the deprecatory form even so late as the year 1240. Matthew Paris says—“ Neque more judicum forensicorum pronuntiat confessor—*absolvimus te, non condemnamus*—sed magis orationem facit super eum, ut Deus absolutionem et remissionem atque gratiam sanctificationis tribuat.”—*De sacer. paen.* c. 19.

pardon from God on behalf of the sinner ; and by the absolution which follows, he reconciles him to the Church. And thus the formula commences with a prayer to God ; while the absolution which follows, and which presupposes God's forgiveness, is pronounced indicatively.* "As to the pardon of sin," writes Marshall, "the power of the priest is mediate and ministerial, not direct nor judicial ; and therefore in the exercise of it the form should be rather precatory than peremptory. But in restoring a man to the peace of the Church . . . there the form may more warrantably be indicative."†

Wheatly, following Marshall, gives much the same account of the employment of the mixed form by our own Church, in the Office for the Visitation of the Sick. "If we look forward to the Collect immediately after to be used, it looks as if the Church did only intend the remission of ecclesiastical censures and bonds. For in that prayer the penitent is said still *most earnestly to desire pardon and forgiveness* : which surely there would be no occasion to do, if he had been actually pardoned and forgiven by God, by virtue of the absolution pronounced before. Again, the priest offers a special request that God would *preserve and continue him in the unity of the Church*; which seems to suppose that the foregoing absolution had been pronounced in order to restore him to its peace."‡ It is somewhat remarkable, however,

* Alex. Hal. *summ. quest.* 21.

† Marshall, *Penitential discipline*, p. 152.

‡ Wheatly, *Common Prayer*, pp. 448, 449.

that this element of the mediæval form of absolution should be the one omitted by our Reformers in adapting it to our own service. The form of the absolution in the Sarum Office embraces, together with the prayer to Christ for His forgiveness, words which pronounce the restoration of the penitent to the Communion of the Church—"et sacramentis Ecclesiae te restituo." The grounds of this omission will probably appear, when we come to consider the views of the Reformers themselves upon the general question.

The introduction of the indicative form, however, although quite legitimate as it was first employed, soon led to abuse and to false doctrine. This may be gathered even from the words of Morinus himself. In his account of the changes which followed the introduction of this form, Morinus writes—"In a few years this opinion (of the necessity of such a form) so prevailed, that it was commonly taught by the Doctors of the Church, that both modes of absolution were to be conjoined . . . At length," he adds, "it was definitively laid down by some writers that the deprecatory formula was no part of the substantial form of absolution, but the indicative alone. And thus it came to pass that all added the indicative form to the precatory, in order that they might not confer a doubtful sacrament."*

* "Tandem a nonnullis definitum est, deprecatoriā illam formulam ad substantialem absolucionis formam nihil pertinere, sed solam indicativam. Quo factum est ut omnes ordinariis precibus formulam adderent indicativam, ne saltem sacramentum dubium conferrent."—*De paen.* viii. 8.

The use of the indicative form was made obligatory in the Western Church, by the decree of the Synod of Loudon, held A. D. 1268, under the presidency of Cardinal Othobon—"Omnis qui confessio aliquorum audiunt a peccatis expressè confitentes absolvant, verba subscripta specialiter exprimentes—'Ego te absolvo a peccatis tuis,'" &c., &c.

Finally, the Council of Trent fixed the use of the indicative form by its Decree—"Docet sancta synodus sacramenti poenitentiae formam, in quâ præcipue ipsius vis sita est, in illis ministri verbis positam esse—*ego te absolvo*." And it adds in explanation, that to these words certain prayers are properly joined, after the custom of the Church; but these in no way belong to the essence of the form, neither are they necessary to the administration of the sacrament.*

In the Eastern Churches, as appears by the Penitentials collected in the *Euchologium* of Goar, the form of absolution is precatory to the present day, being simply a prayer to God for His forgiveness. There is, however, as Morinus tells us, some use of the indicative form among the Greeks in the release from Church censures.†

* *Concil. Trid. sess. xiv. 3.*

† "Demonstratur duplicitis absolutionis apud Græcos, ut etiam apud Latinos, usum fuisse, quarum una est a peccatis, altera quæ priorem sequebatur, a penit. canonice."—Morinus *de sacr. pœnit.* viii. 12.

CHAPTER III.

VIEWS OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES REGARDING ABSOLUTION.

I HAVE endeavoured to show, in the preceding chapters, first, that the promise of our Lord to Peter, and to the whole body of His disciples, contained in Matt. xvi. and xviii., and the gift bestowed on His Church on the evening of the Resurrection-day (John xx.), related to one and the same subject, and were understood to do so not only by the Primitive Church, but also by the Church of the middle ages; and, secondly, that that subject was the authority to exercise discipline, to expel from the Communion of the faithful, and to restore to it again upon repentance. At the period of the Reformation, however, a different view of these two questions was propounded, which we must now consider.

Peter Lombard, and after him the best of the schoolmen, maintained that the absolution of the priest had no effect, either in pardoning the fault, or in remitting the penalty due to it, both of which were the prerogatives of

God alone; but that the priest is said to forgive or retain sins, when he judges and declares that they are forgiven or retained by God.* This explanation, which had long before been offered by St. Jerome, supposes the penitent sinner to be already pardoned, and assigns to the priest the office of *judging* and *declaring* what God had done. And, at a later period, Bede limited the exercise of the absolving power of the priest to the case of those whom he knew to have been restored to spiritual life by the grace of God; and explained the ministerial office, in the work of loosing, by the words addressed by Christ to those who witnessed the raising of Lazarus by His Divine power—"Loose him, and let him go."

But here an element of uncertainty is introduced into the transaction, which is entirely foreign to it, and at variance with the tenor of our Lord's words. The judgment of the priest may be in error, and in such case his sentence is vain. This seems to have been admitted. St. Gregory says—"It must be seen what is the sin, and what penitence has followed its com-

* "Solus Deus dimitit peccata et retinet; et tamen ecclesie contulit potestatem ligandi et solvendi. Sed aliter ipse solvit vel ligat, aliter ecclesia. Ipse enim per se tantum dimitit peccatum, qui et animam mundat ab interiori macula, et a debito aeternæ mortis solvit. Non tamen hoc sacerdotibus concessit, quibus tamen tribuit potestatem solvendi et ligandi; id est, ostendendi homines ligatos vel solutos. Unde Dominus leporum sanitati prius per se restituit; deinde ad sacerdotes misit, quorum judicio ostenderetur mundatus."—Petr. Lomb. *Sent.* lib. iv. In this view the Master of the sentences is followed by the best of the schoolmen.

mittal; that the sentence of the pastor may absolve those whom Almighty God has awakened by the grace of contrition. For," he adds, "the absolution of the bishop is then only true, when it follows the decision of the Eternal Judge."* In the language of the schoolmen, the absolution was valid only when no error had been committed in the use of the keys—*clavis non errante*.

It was probably to remove this element of doubt that many of the Churches of the Reformation connected the declaration of forgiveness (not with the *actual*, but) with the *supposed* state of the sinner's heart. The offer of the forgiveness of sin was believed to be made, not to any *absolutely*, but to *all conditionally*; and the instrument by which it was conveyed was deemed to be the preaching of the Gospel. The *power of the keys* was accordingly believed to consist (either in whole or in part) in the ministry of the Gospel, by which the entrance of the kingdom of Heaven was opened or closed.

Thus the Helvetic Confession says—"We say that all Ministers duly called have the power of the keys, and exercise the same when they announce the Gospel—that is, teach the people entrusted to their care, exhort, console, rebuke, and discipline them. For thus

* "Tunc enim vera est absolutio praesidentis, cum æterni arbitrium sequitur Judicia."—Gregor. *in evang.* hom. 26. The words of Gregory have been adopted by several of the subsequent Councils, as conveying the true view of the Church's power of binding and loosing.

they open the kingdom of Heaven to the obedient, and close it against the disobedient.”*

The English Reformers of the reign of Edward VI. for the most part held the same view of the power of the keys. Thus in King Edward’s Catechism, they say—“To this Church belong the keys wherewith Heaven is locked and unlocked; for that is done by the ministration of the Word, whereunto properly appertaineth the power to bind and loose, to hold guilty and forgive sins. So that whosoever believeth the Gospel preached in this Church, he shall be saved: but whosoever believeth not shall be damned.”

The Lutheran Confessions, on the other hand, regard the power of the keys as extending to discipline, as well as to the ministry of the Word. Thus the Confession of Augsburg says—“The power of the keys is the power, or the command of God, to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments. For with this command Christ sent forth His Apostles.”† And it then quotes, in confirmation of this view, the words of Christ recorded in John xx., as well as those in Mark xvi. And the *Apology for the Confes-*

* “Dicimus omnes ministros legitimè vocatos habere et exercere claves, vel usum clavium, cum evangelium advunciant, id est, populum suæ fidei creditum docent, hortantur, consolantur, et increpant, inque disciplinâ retinent. Ita enim regnum cœlorum aperiunt obsequentibus, et inobsequentibus claudunt.”—*Conf. Helvet.* ii. cap. 14.

† “Sic autem sentiunt, potestatem clavium . . . potestatem esse, seu mandatum Dei, prædicandi evangelii, remittendi et retinendi peccata, et administrandi sacramenta.”—*Conf. August.* de potestate ecclesiastica.

sion expresses this double office even more distinctly—"The Bishop," it says, "has the *power of order*, that is, the ministry of the Word and sacraments. He has also the *power of jurisdiction*, that is, the authority to excommunicate those guilty of public crimes, and to absolve them again, if they are converted, and seek absolution."* And the Catechism of Heidelberg says, in answer to the question—"What is the office of the keys?"—"The preaching of the holy Gospel, and Christian discipline, by which the kingdom of Heaven is opened to believers, and shut against unbelievers."

Differing from all the foregoing, the Bohemian Confession appears to limit the power of the keys to Christian discipline. It declares that—"Christ hath given His ministers power to cast out sinners from the Christian Church, to shut the kingdom of heaven against them, and to deliver them to Satan."

And similar changes of view were exhibited by the English Reformers. In the reign of Elizabeth, the view of the nature of our Lord's Commission, which connects it with the discipline of the Church, found expression in our Church's public documents. Thus, in the second book of the *Homilies*, it is said:—"Christ ordained the authority of the keys, to excommunicate notorious sinners, and to absolve them which are truly

* "Habet episcopus potestatem ordinis, hoc est ministerium verbi et sacramentorum : habet et potestatem jurisdictionis, hoc est, auctoritatem excommunicandi obnoxios publicis criminibus, et rursus absolvendi eos, si conversi petant absolutionem."—*Apol. Aug. Conf.*

penitent.”* And the two views are combined, as giving the full meaning of the passages in Matthew and John, in Jewel’s *Apology*. In the *Defence* of the *Apology* this is thus succinctly expressed :—

“ We say that the power, as well of loosing as also of binding, standeth in God’s word ; and the exercise or execution of the same standeth *either in preaching, or else in sentence of correction and ecclesiastical discipline.*”† And again :—“ Our doctrine is plain, that there be *two keys in the kingdom of God*; the one of *instruction*, the other of *correction*. Whereof one worketh inwardly, the other outwardly; the one before God, the other before the congregation.”‡

This two-fold significance of the power of the keys is thus expressed in the Westminster Confession :— “ To these officers the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven are committed, by virtue whereof they have power respectively to retain and remit sins, to shut that Kingdom against the impenitent, both by the word and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the Gospel, and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.” And the document refers to the two passages in Matthew, and to 2 Cor. ii. in support of the doctrine; the reference to John xx. is implied in the words themselves.

It is doubtless true that the Apostles were not only authorized, but commanded to declare God’s forgive-

* Homily for Whitsunday.

† Jewel’s Works (P. S. edit.), p. 362. ‡ Ibid. p. 369.

ness of sin to all, upon the conditions of faith and repentance. But this command, we believe, was not the subject referred to by our Lord in the words recorded by St. John. Such an interpretation involves two assumptions, each of which is doubtful. In the first place, to *forgive sins* must be held to mean to *declare sins forgiven*; and secondly, the promise, which is *expressed absolutely*, must be understood *conditionally*, neither of the supposed conditions being even alluded to in this, or in the related passages of the other evangelist.

But there seems to be even a greater difficulty in the way of this interpretation. The words recorded by St. John, literally translated, are—"If ye remit the sins of *any*, they are remitted," &c. The words of our Lord's Commission to preach the Gospel, are—"Go ye into *all the world*, and preach the Gospel to *every creature*." It is plain that these two Commissions differ in almost every essential particular. The one is a *command*; the other is a *permission*. And again, the one is *universal*, whose object is "*all the world*"; while the other is *particular*, and contemplates only some or certain persons. It is surely a forced interpretation which applies language, so different to the same subject. The double interpretation of the power of the keys, propounded by the Lutheran Churches, and accepted by Jewel, is open to the same objections even more palpably.

And for the justice of this criticism we can adduce weighty authority. Archbishop Potter, after giv-

ing the reasons for identifying in meaning the passage which we have been considering with those of the synoptic Evangelist, then adds—"Some indeed will have nothing further to be understood by these words, than that the Apostles were authorised to preach the Gospel, which whoever embraced should have his sins forgiven ; and on the contrary, the sins of those who rejected the Gospel should be retained, or punished. *But this is a manifest force upon the words, which are never taken in this sense through the whole New Testament.*" And in confirmation of this view he adds—"Besides, this power of remitting and retaining sins, or, as it is called in other places, of binding and loosing, manifestly implies a difference to be made by the Apostles: the sins of some men they were to remit, those of others to retain ; whereas they were obliged to preach the Gospel to all nations, and, as it is elsewhere expressed, to every creature without partiality or distinction."*

These objections are much strengthened by the circumstance that the Commission to preach the Gospel was given by our Lord to His Apostles upon a different occasion, as well as in different language. It appears, in fact, to have been the parting injunction of the great Head of the Church, given as He was about to ascend into Heaven (*Mark* xvi. 15, 16).

It is true, the exposition of the Church's powers, to

* Potter. *Church Government*, pp. 318, 319. 5th edit.

which we have referred, is just and sound. But when these two powers are embraced under one—the *power of the keys*; and when the same utterances of our blessed Lord are taken as the authority for both—as is done in the Lutheran Confessions, and in the writings of the later English Reformers—things are confounded which are in themselves distinct,* and the so-called power of the keys is made to extend to sins against God, as well as to sins against the brethren. That such confusion is not justified by the language of Scripture, we have endeavoured to show; and Church history testifies that it is at variance with the views of the Primitive Church. But more than all this, it leads to dangerous consequences, which have already manifested themselves in the Reformed Church. As regards the pardon of sins against God, the Church is commissioned to proclaim

* This confusion has been avoided by Calvin, but by a still more doubtful hypothesis. According to him, the authority to preach the Gospel is based upon the words of Christ in Matt. xvi. and John xx., while the power of discipline rests upon those in Matt. xviii. After some discussion of these passages, he writes—"This command concerning remitting and retaining sins, and that promise made to Peter concerning binding and loosing, ought to be referred to nothing but the ministry of the word." But of the passage in Matthew xviii. he writes—"This passage is not altogether similar to the former, but is to be understood somewhat differently . . . They differ in this, that the former passage relates specially to the preaching which the ministers of the word perform; the latter relates to the discipline of excommunication which has been committed to the Church."—*Institutes*, iv. chap. 11 (Clarke's translation). I am unable to discern any weight in these statements, beyond that due to the high authority of Calvin; and they are undoubtedly at variance with the views of the early Fathers.

the message of His forgiveness and mercy : as regards sins against the brethren, the Church can actually herself *confer* forgiveness. But the history of the mediæval Church has shown how hard it is to maintain this plain distinction. The absolute authority which belongs to the latter act will be transferred to the former, and the Church will insensibly glide into the Romish error as to the pardon of sin.

In bringing to a close this tract, the writer has much satisfaction in referring to a document of the Church of Ireland, adopted at the latest Synod which was held before its disestablishment. It is a service for the reception into the Church of those who had lapsed, adopted at the meeting of the Irish Convocation which was held in the year 1710. In this the form of restoration to Communion, to be pronounced by the Minister, laying his hand upon the head of the penitent, is as follows :—

“ Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath commanded that repentance and remission of sins should be published in His name among all nations, of His great mercy give unto thee repentance, and forgive thee all thy sins. And I, His Minister, by the authority committed unto me, do absolve thee from all ecclesiastical censures which thou hast or mayest have incurred, by reason of thy former errors, schisms, and heresy. And I restore thee to the full communion of the Catholic Church, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”

After this comes the benediction; and the rubric which follows directs—"Then shall the absolved person rise, and go and take his place in the church; or if there be (as is requisite) a Communion, at the Communion table amongst the rest of the congregation."

These words, and this form, are in complete harmony with the practice of the Primitive Church, and, as we believe, with Apostolic teaching. The penitent sinner is absolved by readmission to Communion; and the act of readmission is accompanied by a prayer for God's forgiveness.

I subjoin here, as closely connected with the foregoing, a few remarks (already made public) upon the authority of ancient rituals, in reference to the use of the words of John xx. 23 in the services for Ordination.

"The language of all the ancient rituals is in accordance with the suggestion that the words under consideration may, with some modification, be properly used in ordaining bishops. Thus the form of consecrating bishops given in the Apostolical Constitutions, which is certainly not later than the fourth century, contains these words:—"Endue him, Lord, through Thy Christ, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, that he may have power to remit sins according to Thy command." The same words, very nearly, occur in the rite of ordaining bishops in the Coptic Church; and, as has been recently ascertained by the researches of

Mr. Estcourt, also in the Church of Abyssinia.* In the Western Church, the following words occur in the Roman form :—"Da ei, Domine, claves regni cœlorum, ut utatur, non glorietur potestate quam tribuis in ædificationem, non in destructionem." The Anglo-Saxon Pontifical of Archbishop Egbert (A. D. 731) is more detailed :—"Da ei, quæsumus, claves regni cœlorum, ut quodcumque ligaverit supra terram, sit ligatum et in cœlis; et quodcumque solverit supra terram, sit solutum in cœlis; et quorum detenuerit peccata, detenta sint, et quorum remiserit, Tu, Domine, dimittere digneris."† On the other hand, it has been abundantly shown by Canon Reichel that the words of John xx. 23 do not occur at all in the form of ordaining presbyters used by the Eastern Churches, nor in those of the Western Churches before the thirteenth century. We have, therefore, the authority of the most ancient rituals for believing that the Primitive Church did not regard the use of these solemn words as properly applicable in the ordination of priests; and that when she used them in the consecration of her bishops, she deemed it necessary to change the *imperative* form of her Lord's utterance into the *precatory*."

* Estcourt, *Anglican ordinations*.

† Martene, *de antiqu. eccl. rit.* viii.

